

Cheryl M. Hargrove

## Heritage Tourism

Visiting historic and cultural sites is one of the most popular tourist activities today. Families, seniors, groups, and even international visitors choose to frequent historic attractions when on vacation. As a result, destinations are paying attention to one of the fastest growing niche market segments in the travel industry today—heritage tourism.

What is heritage tourism? The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines heritage tourism as “traveling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.”

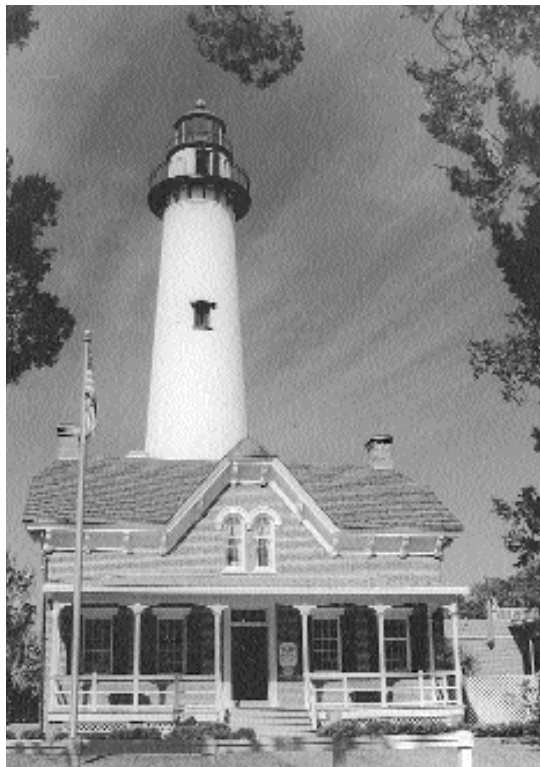
Why has heritage tourism captured so much attention during the past decade? Primarily, economics drive the interest in heritage tourism. According to a recent study by the Travel Industry Association of America, people who engage in historic and cultural activities spend more, do more, and stay longer than other types of U.S. travelers. Last year, visiting historic

and cultural sites ranked second to shopping in the list of activities engaged in while on holiday. Baby boomers in particular wish to experience history through travel, visiting the authentic places where significant events occurred or made relevant contributions to the development of America. Even international visitors to the U.S. desire America’s heritage; one of three tour a historic or cultural attraction during their holiday. The potential is huge, not only to attract more visitors to lesser-known sites but also to increase the monies generated from existing or new visitors. Heritage tourism also uses assets—historic, cultural, and natural resources—that already exist. Rather than creating and building attractions, destinations look to the past for a sustainable future. Indeed these assets need preservation and often restoration or interpretation, but the foundation for creating a dynamic travel experience lives on in the stories and structures of the past. Often, the opportunity to create a tourist product is more easily attained by using existing heritage sites than if the destination had to develop new attractions.

An obvious way for destinations to identify heritage resources is to tap the National Register of Historic Places. About 74,000 listings make up the National Register, including all historic areas in the national park system, over 2,300 National Historic Landmarks and properties—sites, buildings, districts, structures, and objects—deemed significant to the nation, a state, or local community. For inclusion in this esteemed group, places must pass rigorous state and national review, providing documentation as to their significant architecture, archeology, age, or association with an individual or event. The prestige associated with national designation elevates these properties above all others, and creates the premier foundation for designing heritage tourism programs.

As the popularity of heritage tourism increases, so does the competition. In the past decade alone, more than half of U.S. states have established formal cultural heritage tourism programs. A January 2001 *Wall Street Journal* article reported that more than a dozen African-American museums either opened to the public or broke ground in the U.S. in 2000. Even theme parks and casinos are focusing on history to promote their attractions: Disney California and several Las Vegas casinos built replicas of major heritage sites to attract visitors to their facilities.

*Museum of Coastal History, St. Simons Island, Georgia. Photo by Tommy E. Jenkins.*





Jekyll Island, Georgia. Photo courtesy Golden Isles Visitors Bureau.

Identifying and promoting real heritage attractions is just the first step in attracting heritage travelers—and their spending. To counter increased competition and manufactured “heritage” experiences, destinations often join together to create theme tours and trails that link sites like a string of pearls. The National Register of Historic Places maintains an immense database of information related to listed properties, providing a handy resource for tour planners and destination marketers to research potential sites and attractions that serve as the basis for a heritage trail or loop tour.

Individual travelers will also find the National Register database as a source to rediscover familiar places or unveil information about new heritage destinations. They can click on <[www.nr.nps.gov](http://www.nr.nps.gov)> for access to America’s heritage chest. Information is available by name, location, agency, or subject. For instance, to explore the Georgia coast, guests can navigate the site a few different ways. For tour operators and local organizers familiar with the destination, a listing of all the National Register properties near Brunswick and the Golden Isles of Georgia may be adequate for trip planning. The site can be searched by state and then by county (Glynn) to get information on Fort Frederica National Monument located on St. Simons Island. Travel planners can retrieve information on Brunswick’s Old Town Historic District and the Jekyll Island Club, a Historic Hotel of America, to create a customized itinerary. In fact, 12 historic sites and districts are listed—a solid foundation for a heritage tour of the coastal area.

Visitors to the Internet site who are just browsing may prefer a special feature—National

Register travel itineraries. Full of photos and maps, the itineraries provide comprehensive information to navigate the voyage along a particular heritage route or theme (see Andrus article, p. 48). *Along the Georgia-Florida Coast* transports the traveler through Brunswick and the Golden Isles, visiting familiar sites accessed through the general database, and 40 other places of historic significance from St. Augustine to Savannah. The section on Colonial History describes early settlers’ encounters with indigenous peoples, European occupation and settlement, plantation agriculture based on African slavery, African-American culture, and even the early days of tourism. This itinerary is just one of some two dozen produced by the National Register of Historic Places in partnership with the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers. Whatever the interest may be—a heritage tour of Detroit or Charleston, the civil rights movement, places where women made history, lighthouses, military history, cultural landscapes—the National Register of Historic Places provides information to customize travel to any U.S. destination.

Heritage tourism’s popularity, though, also stems from the opportunity to educate. The American heritage traveler is older, better educated, and more affluent than other tourists. Mission-driven institutions managing historic sites recognize that heritage tourism provides a unique opportunity to inform people on the importance of preserving and protecting America’s treasures. The National Register of Historic Places is our country’s list of sites, buildings, structures, districts, and objects worthy of preservation and promotion. Awareness through tourism can ensure that America’s most valued treasures are conserved and maintained for the enjoyment not just of heritage travelers today, but also by future generations. Through appropriate funding, sensitive development, and promotion, heritage tourism affords a solid foundation that sustains the resource as well as offering a social and economic impact.

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