Reynolds: Be a tourist in your own backyard and beyond

5:30 am

In early April, I participated in my first trade show as sales coordinator for the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau. The show was at Eagle Ridge in Galena, with Circle Wisconsin Midwest Marketplace.

I was told by several Tour Illinois colleagues that I am now spoiled because of the beautiful location; I would agree. Not only that, the entire group was treated to a lovely evening in downtown Galena. We were greeted by historical figures such as Ulysses S. Grant; we mingled and networked at the historic DeSoto House Hotel, the oldest operating hotel in Illinois; and we explored the quaint shops, restaurants and galleries up and down Main Street. It was a refreshing taste of tourism at its finest, thanks to the folks and partners representing Galena Country Tourism, the direct marketing organization for the Galena area.

Over the following day and a half, I met with 36 tour operators from around the country including Ohio, Michigan, California, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota and Minnesota. It was like the tourism industry’s version of speed dating, as appointments were scheduled at 6-minute intervals with 12 minutes in between. It was a ton of fun meeting new people, learning about their businesses and the interests of their travel groups, and promoting the events and attractions that DeKalb County boasts.

DeKalb County is a unique place to explore, where residents and visitors alike can experience contemporary culture and countryside charm. There always is plenty to enjoy here, and that was evidenced by the genuine interest expressed by the tour operators. I think it’s easy to take for granted what’s in your own backyard, don’t you? What’s on your list of attractions and experiences you have not yet seen and done in DeKalb County? I invite you to visit and cruise around the DCCVB website at www.dekalbcountyccvb.com to get some ideas for your next local adventure. Check out our calendar of events, as well, as the interactive visitors guide.

One of the roles of the DCCVB, as the only certified direct marketing organization for DeKalb County, is cultivating relationships with the group tour market with the goal of greater economic impact generated from visitor spending. However, on behalf of my wonderful and hard-working colleagues in tourism, I would also like to encourage you to get out there and explore the rest of Illinois. It seems we all know a lot about that windy city to the east of us, but what about the other directions on the map?

I invite you to visit the Tour Illinois website, https://torillinois.org, where you will find a complete list of convention and visitor bureaus that represent the four regions of Illinois. These regions are Chicago & Beyond, Great Rivers Country, Land of Lincoln and Trails to Adventure. Here are a few of my favorite examples of fun and adventure throughout these regions from the website:

Sleep under the stars in the ultimate glamping experience in McHenry County. Glamping? Yep. Folks can find refuge in nature without giving up some of those glamorous luxuries from home or a fancy hotel. Grab your binoculars and hop on a golf cart in Carroll County for birding tours from May through September along the mighty Mississippi. You may even see a bald eagle or two! Music lovers from rock to jazz to hip-hop will love the nightlife in Champaign County. From dive bars to dance clubs to upscale lounges, anyone can discover their perfect night on the town while exploring the Land of Lincoln. Thrill-seekers can see the
beautiful Shawnee National Forest in Jackson County while ziplining from above or braving a night tour hike along a suspension bridge, illuminated by the full moon.

My Tour Illinois colleagues and I are all in this together, inviting visitors to come and stay for a day or more in each of our regions. Be a tourist in your own back yard! Then share what's great about DeKalb County with the people you meet as you experience new adventures throughout Illinois. Happy travels!

To view the impact of tourism in DeKalb County, visit http://dekalbcountycvb.com/economic-impact-of-tourism.

• Erin Reynolds is the interim executive director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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