

NH among states and regions promoting tourism corridors

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The Associated Press
Sunday, Apr. 30, 2006

Tourism traffic to the historical Piatt Castles — picturesque stone Civil War-era homes that hug the western Ohio hillsides — has been steadily falling for 10 years.

But Margaret Piatt hopes to save the attraction by joining forces with a restored theater, a Frank Lloyd Wright house and other nearby tourist sites, creating a travel corridor tied to a scenic highway.

Rising fuel prices and increasing competition for the entertainment dollar are putting pressure on tiny, one-stop tourist sites. States and regions are starting to pitch their tourist attractions as single-destination spots, hoping that more is better.

New Hampshire has begun offering multi-site Golden Pond and Robert Frost tours. Mississippi is starting a blues heritage trail. And a group in northeast Mississippi wants to package sites associated with novelist William Faulkner.

"When they pool their resources they can have a major-league Web site and they can be competitive," said Allen Kay, spokesman for the Travel Industry Association of America.

Similar efforts are being made in many big cities, where discount passes and cards are being used to entice tourists to a variety of attractions.

The two Piatt Castles in West Liberty, Ohio, were built during and after the Civil War at a time many Americans were fascinated with castle-like architecture. Constructed with limestone from nearby quarries, they feature soaring gables, ornate frescoed ceilings and gothic arched walls.

"We're sort of invisible," said Margaret Piatt, great-great-granddaughter of Abram Piatt, one of the builders. "I mean where are we? We're in the middle of nowhere."

Enter Excursion 68, a plan to promote the tourist sights along a 50-mile stretch of U.S. 68 as a single attraction for travelers interested in architecture and arts.

The sites include the Piatt Castles, the Holland Theater in Bellefontaine, Wright's Westcott House in Springfield and the artisans and shops of Yellow Springs, a throwback-to-the-1960s village where tank tops, sandals and T-shirts emblazoned with the likes of Bob Dylan are common attire.

A Web site promoting Excursion 68 is to be started this summer, with brochures and billboards also a possibility.

Also coming is the Mississippi Blues Heritage Trail, a network of interpretive displays in the Mississippi Delta at the birthplaces and burial sites of great blues artists and places where significant blues events occurred.

The first 10 sites on a 100-mile stretch are expected to have markers by the end of the summer. They include a radio station in Greenwood where BB King first performed professionally, the grave of singer Charley Patton near Indianola, and the Riverside Hotel in Clarksdale, where Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Sam Cooke stayed.

The goal is to educate residents about their own heritage, inform travelers who happen upon the sites and to attract "blues pilgrims," tourists lured by the history of great blues artists, said Luther Brown, director of the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University.

"We hope we see an increase in tourism and consequently an increase in support for local business ventures," Brown said.

The collective marketing appears to have worked for Montana, which went to the regional approach in 1986 with Custer Country. The corridor features the Little Bighorn battlefield, a portion of the Lewis & Clark trail, dinosaur digs and a wild-horse range.

The number of tourists who go to Montana has increased from 2.5 million in 1986 to 10 million last year, with Custer Country drawing one of every four.

Annual tourism spending has increased from about \$150 million to \$2 billion.

"We had so many small towns in eastern Montana that didn't have the ability to market themselves," said Jim Schaefer, executive director of the Custer Country Tourism Region. "They just had to go digging and scratching to find funds."

Northeast Mississippi hopes for similar success with a corridor devoted to native son Faulkner — author of "The Sound and the Fury" and "As I Lay Dying" — although the initiative is still in the planning stages. There are 10 major Faulkner sites within an hour's drive, including Faulkner's birthplace of New Albany, his farmhouse, and Oxford, the setting for many of his novels and stories.

"We're a very rural area," said Kent Bain, coordinator for the Mississippi Hills Heritage Area Alliance. "We feel like the trail and tours are the step we need to take if we're going to do any long-term tourism development."

New Hampshire began packaging tourist sites together in March, binding them on a Web site with suggested itineraries.

A seaside tour features stops at coastal beaches and at a state park with marshes for bird-watching. Then it's on to Portsmouth for a harbor cruise to see fleets of lobster boats and for a walking tour that includes a stop at the house of naval leader John Paul Jones.

The Robert Frost tour takes travelers to the poet's modest clapboard farmhouse in Derry and along a trail in the woods with markers pointing out familiar spots from Frost's poems. The trail follows stone walls that were the inspiration for the poem "Mending Wall" and snuggles up to "Hyla Brook," another Frost poem.

The tour includes a trip to the Dartmouth College library to see Frost's papers. Covered bridges and artisans' studios are also on the route, which includes the White Mountains National Forest.

Bill Egan, 61, of nearby Canterbury, has visited the Frost farm several times. He believes having multiple Frost sites in a corridor will increase tourism.

"It will have initially a limited number of people that will take advantage of it," Egan said. "But I'm imagining it will grow. It has to be in large part people that have an understanding of Frost."

Piatt believes the marketing technique will work for her and that tourists won't be disappointed.

"There's enough to do — if you're not from here — in a couple of days that would make you walk away and say, 'That's charming. That was enchanting. That was interesting,'" she said.

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