

TourismMarketing Today

The Official Newsletter of Destinations Florida | www.DestinationsFlorida.org | September 2026



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Celebrating a Career of Leadership and Vision: Mark Jackson

Destinations Florida congratulates Mark Jackson, director of Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing, on his retirement following a remarkable 34-year career with Polk County, including leading the county's tourism and sports marketing efforts through Visit Central Florida.

Jackson's career has been defined by a rare combination of tourism expertise, sports marketing experience, community leadership, and an instinct for recognizing the opportunities that can transform a destination. Under his leadership, sports tourism became a major economic-



Mark Jackson leads the crowd in *Celebrating Tourism!* during a Tourism Week celebration.

development strategy for Polk County. In 2023 alone, Visit Central Florida Sports recruited and hosted 308 sporting events, generating more than \$215M in economic impact.

MARK JACKSON continues on pg. 3

Thank You, Sir!

by Robert Skrob



There's a good chance I would not be executive director of Destinations Florida today without Mark Jackson.

In 2011, I pushed our organization toward a change before I had built the consensus to support it. Some members were ready to replace the change agent. Mark saw what I saw, but more importantly, he helped everyone give the process time. Within 60 days, the need for change became clear. That ultimately led us to engage Mat Forrest as our industry's legislative representative. That

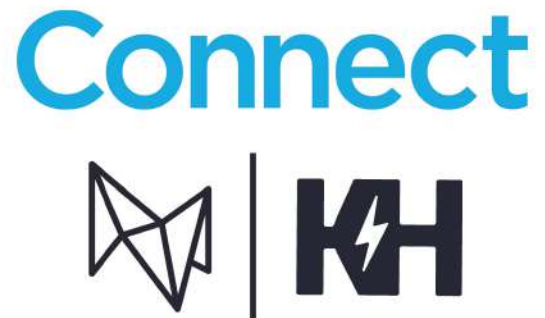
E.D.'s MESSAGE... continues on pg. 3

Support from our partners makes Destinations Florida's industry & legislative representation possible

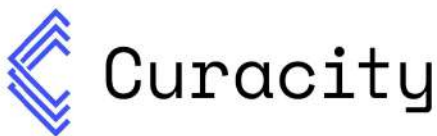
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HAPPY Birthday

Julie White
September 24

MARK JACKSON... continued from pg. 1

3

His contributions to Polk County tourism extend well beyond sports. Jackson played a key role in helping recruit LEGOLAND Florida to the former Cypress Gardens property and was instrumental in securing millions of dollars for improvements at Tigertown and the RP Funding Center. He also provided vision and guidance for the development of Lake

Myrtle Sports Park in Auburndale, which grew to include 11 soccer fields, nine baseball fields, and a competition water ski lake, as well as the AdventHealth Fieldhouse in Winter Haven.

Jackson's connection to Polk County tourism is also deeply

MARK JACKSON continues on pg. 4

E.D.'s MESSAGE... continued from pg. 1

He began a new era for Destinations Florida.

That's Mark. He sees opportunities before they become obvious and has the patience and determination to work with others to make them real.

His own community has illustrated this several times over.

First, Mark recognized sports tourism as an economic development strategy long before it became fashionable. That work helped build a year-round visitor economy and gave Polk County an identity beyond simply being between Tampa and Orlando.

Then came an even bigger opportunity.

Cypress Gardens, the attraction where Mark himself had once performed as a professional water skier, had struggled through ownership changes and ultimately closed. When Merlin Entertainments began considering the property for LEGOLAND Florida, Mark helped negotiate the deal and the county support necessary to bring an international



Robert Skrob thanks Mark Jackson at the appreciation and celebration event hosted by Camp Margaritaville marking Jackson's retirement after decades of service in Florida's DMO industry.

attraction company to Polk County.

LEGOLAND Florida opened in 2011. Today it is a 150-acre, multiday resort with more than 50 rides, shows, and attractions, a water park, and themed lodging.

That's what destination leadership can do. You build visitation. You build a reputation. You build relationships. Eventually, someone thousands of miles away decides your community is where they want to invest their capital.

Mark, as you retire, I want to thank you for what you've done for your community, for Florida, and for me—both for your support and your example.

DESTINATIONS
FLORIDA
TourismMarketing
Today

The Official Newsletter of
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On the Cover

An aerial view across Sarasota Bay at sunset with parts of the downtown skyline illuminated by golden evening light. Featured are the waterfront marina, Bayfront Park, boats on the water, and the bridge stretching toward barrier islands.

personal. Before entering tourism leadership, he built an impressive career in the water-skiing industry. A Wisconsin native, he earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin and a master's degree in business from Florida Southern College. He performed with the Bartlett Water Ski Shows, became a professional water skier with the Cypress Gardens Water Ski Team, and competed on the Coors Light Water Ski Tour.



Mark Jackson in his competitive water skiing days

His career took another important turn when he became the first-ever marketing director for USA Water Ski. There, he built the organization's first comprehensive national marketing program, developed the "Hot Summer Nights" program for ESPN, created corporate sponsorship programs, and led membership-development initiatives. He also spent more than two decades as a television color commentator for nationally televised water-skiing events, including ESPN.

That background gave Jackson a unique perspective on the power of

sports to promote a destination. He became nationally recognized as an expert in the economic impact of sports tourism and played a leading role in strengthening Polk County's identity as the Water Ski Capital of the World. Among his accomplishments was bringing the USA Water Ski & Wake Sports Hall of Fame Museum to the Visit Central Florida Welcome Center in Davenport.

Jackson's own reflections on his career demonstrate how closely his professional journey has been intertwined with the evolution of Polk County tourism. He remembers arriving at Cypress Gardens in 1981 as a young man from Wisconsin and describes the experience with characteristic enthusiasm: "To me, it felt like I'd been called up to the New York Yankees."

Years later, Jackson would help lead Polk County tourism through a period when the destination faced significant challenges. The departure of two Spring Training baseball teams, the closure of Grenelefe Resort, and eventually Cypress Gardens prompted some to declare that tourism in Polk County was finished. Jackson saw it differently. "They were wrong. We may have been down, but we were not out."

That resilience has remained a central theme of Jackson's career. As he leaves the tourism industry he has helped shape, he points to the generations of leaders who built its foundation and to the innovators continuing to move it forward. "Tourism and this department were built on the shoulders of resilient visionaries," he said, citing Dick Pope, Ron Morrow, and Gene Engle among those who helped establish that foundation.

Jackson's legacy is ultimately one of vision, perseverance, and belief in the potential of a destination. He leaves Polk County tourism at a time when the industry is experiencing what he calls a "renaissance," with new attractions, experiences, and entrepreneurs expanding the county's tourism offerings and reaching new markets.

Destinations Florida joins the many colleagues and friends across Florida's tourism industry in congratulating Mark Jackson on an extraordinary career.

Announcing Mark Jackson Champions Lake

Lake Myrtle Sports Park in Auburndale now has a permanent reminder of the contributions Mark Jackson made to Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing as its director. Announced during Jackson's retirement celebration on Aug. 13, the newly named Mark Jackson Champions Lake at Lake Myrtle Sports Park is a fitting tribute to Jackson's leadership in making sports tourism a major contributor to Polk County's tourism economy.



Mark Jackson and the newly named Mark Jackson Champions Lake at Lake Myrtle Sports Park in the City of Auburndale

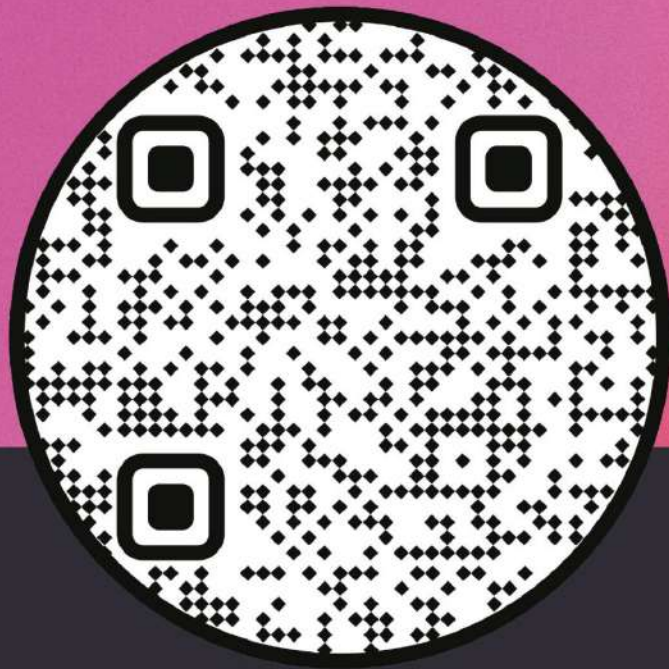


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Virginia Haley Inducted Into Destinations International Hall of Fame

One of the architects behind Sarasota County's rise as a premier travel destination has received one of the tourism industry's highest honors. Virginia J. Haley, CDME, former president of Visit Sarasota County, was inducted into the Destinations International Hall of Fame during the association's annual meeting held in Portland, Oregon, in July, recognizing a career that helped shape both Sarasota's visitor economy and the destination marketing profession.



Virginia Haley, CDME

Haley began her career at a time when the Tourist Development Tax generated \$5.4M annually; at the end of her 24-year tenure as president in September 2023, the tax generated \$40M annually. Elevating Sarasota's appeal and awareness as a tourism destination remains one of Haley's deepest legacies.

"There are few people who leave a mark on an industry the way Virginia has in tourism and, by extension, our destination," said Erin Duggan, president and CEO of Visit Sarasota County. "On a personal level,

I have learned from her as both a leader and a mentor, and I know I'm far from alone in that experience. Her impact extends beyond the years she served as president, and this honor is well earned."

Among her many accomplishments, Haley helped launch innovative tourism initiatives, strengthened Sarasota County's cultural and sports tourism assets, and played a pivotal role in community-transforming projects such as The Bay. Haley was also a prominent figure in the tourism industry on a state and national level, spearheaded VSC's effort to earn international accreditation, and, subsequently, chaired Destination International's global Destination Management Accreditation Program (DMAP) for DMOs. She also chaired Destinations Florida and the VISIT FLORIDA Board of Directors.

Since the Hall of Fame Awards were created in 2014, Destinations International has recognized more than 50 pioneers whose contributions have advanced the tourism industry worldwide. Haley now joins an esteemed group of industry leaders whose work has shaped travel promotion and destination stewardship.

"I was so surprised when Don Welsh called me with the news that I was selected for the Destinations International



Virginia Haley, CDME, is inducted into the Destination International Hall of Fame. Pictured are President & CEO Don Welsh of Destinations International, former President Virginia Haley of Visit Sarasota County, President & CEO Tammy Canavan of Visit Seattle, and President & CEO Cleo Battle of Louisville Tourism.

Hall of Fame," Haley said. "It is humbling to be in such fine company in the tourism industry. This honor is a positive reflection of the dedication of the whole Visit Sarasota County team."

Haley now splits her time between Sarasota and Burnsville, N.C., where she says she gets to pursue her passions for ceramics, gardening, and "of course, the grandchildren."

Sebring's HGTV *Home Town Takeover* Earns Emmy Nomination

HGTV's *Home Town Takeover*, the renovation series that turned downtown Sebring into a national television star, has earned its first-ever award recognition: a 2026 Daytime Emmy nomination for Outstanding Instructional/How-To Program. The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences announced the nomination, marking the first time the series, and hosts Ben and Erin Napier, have been recognized by the Television Academy in any category.

Season three of *Home Town Takeover* brought Ben and Erin Napier to Sebring in early 2024, where they joined HGTV's all-star experts and local residents for three months to renovate homes, revive small businesses, and reimagine public spaces including the historic Circle Park. The season wrapped with a community celebration downtown on May 24, 2024, and premiered on HGTV nearly a year later, on Mar. 8, 2025.

The recognition comes as the Sebring area, including nearby Avon Park and Lake Placid, continues to see the show's impact on tourism. According to the Greater Sebring Chamber of Commerce, foot traffic at its Welcome Center in the Circle Theatre rose 368% in March 2025 compared to the same month the year before, as visitors arrived to walk the same downtown circle they'd seen on television. Demand for the Chamber's Walking Tour of Historic Sebring brochure has been so strong that its print run has grown from an initial 2,500 copies to more than 10,000. Downtown merchants, meanwhile, have reported sales increases of 200% to 300% over pre-show numbers, according to the Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency.

"A Daytime Emmy nomination is a rare kind of media moment: it puts *Home Town Takeover*, and Sebring along with it, back in front of a national audience right as we're still seeing the show's ripple effects locally,"



Ben and Erin Napier in Sebring, "The City on the Circle"

said Casey Hartt, who oversees tourism for Highlands County. "For travelers who missed the season the first time around, this nomination is a new reason to put Sebring on their radar. And for those who already visited, it's a reminder there's still more to see downtown, from the newly opened shops and restaurants to Circle Park itself."

Learn more at VisitSebring.com/hgtv.



TDT Plans and Funding Allocations

by Steven M. Hogan

When a county first decides to impose a Tourist Development Tax, the TDT statute requires counties that impose the TDT to enact, via ordinance, a plan for how TDT funds are to be spent. § 125.0104(4)(a), (c), Fla. Stat. (ordinance enacting the plan; required plan contents).

The statute allows two methods for a TDT plan to specify the approximate cost or expense of each project listed therein: (i) approximate cost; or (ii) expense allocation. § 125.0401(4)(c), Fla. Stat.

A problem may arise if a county's plan provides specific percentage allocations of the TDT to particular projects. Specifically, what happens down the line when a county wants to shift TDT revenues to other projects?

The Florida attorney general has advised that in such circumstances, the county must amend the plan itself in order to use funds for other purposes. Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. 2000-29 (2000). The attorney general explained that because a county's ordinance was specific as to the percentage of TDT funds allocated to beach nourishment and erosion control, those percentages had to be honored.

However, the attorney general also explained that the county could always amend the plan without a new referendum by following the procedures set forth in section 125.0401(4)(d). *Id.* (citing *Rowe v. Pinellas Sports Authority*, 461 So.2d 72 (Fla. 1984)).

A county with a TDT plan that is specific as to the percentage of funds allocated to particular projects should take heed to Opinion 2000-29 if changes in the allocation formula are to be made.

Steven M. Hogan is a shareholder with the Ausley McMullen law firm in Tallahassee. Destinations Florida has retained Mr. Hogan to consult with our members on the Tourist Development Tax and related legal issues. You can contact Mr. Hogan at shogan@ausley.com. Nothing in this article constitutes legal advice. Please seek counsel of your own choosing before making decisions that impact yourself or your organization.



Steven M. Hogan

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BEST of CENTRAL FLORIDA!



- Discover Lake County
- Experience Kissimmee
- Explore Lakeland
- Ocala/Marion County VCB
- Orlando North, Seminole County
- Visit Central Florida
- Visit Orlando

Discover Lake County's Event Sponsorship Program Delivers Record Economic Impact

Discover Lake County's Event Sponsorship Program continued to deliver record-breaking results this year, demonstrating the power of strategic tourism investment to drive visitation and economic growth. In a milestone year, the Office of Tourism supported 203 events that generated an estimated \$198.8M in economic impact, the highest annual total in the program's history. By partnering with sporting events, fishing tournaments, festivals, and community celebrations, the program attracts overnight visitors, increases lodging demand, and generates spending at local restaurants, retailers, attractions, and other tourism-related businesses.

Every sponsorship is evaluated for its potential to generate overnight visitation and maximize economic return, ensuring tourism funding is invested in opportunities that deliver

measurable results. These partnerships not only help event organizers grow and enhance their events but also encourage repeat visitation and expand Lake County's tourism offerings throughout the year.

The continued success of the Event Sponsorship Program reflects Discover Lake County's commitment to investing in initiatives that create lasting value for the destination. By leveraging tourism development funding to attract high-quality events, the program supports local businesses, strengthens the visitor economy, and delivers a significant return on investment. This year's record-setting impact reinforces the important role strategic event partnerships play in sustaining long-term tourism growth and economic prosperity for Lake County.



A drone show lights up the sky at the Mount Dora Fall Festival.



An angler displays his catch at a fishing tournament in Lake County.



BEST of CENTRAL FLORIDA!

Kissimmee Latin Culinary Trail Celebrates Successful First Year

Launched 10 months ago in partnership with Atlas Obscura, the Kissimmee Latin Culinary Trail has quickly become a powerful platform for showcasing Osceola County's rich cultural identity through food. In its first year, the campaign generated 72.9M total impressions, including 37.7M Meta impressions and more than 3M YouTube views.



Experience Kissimmee unveils the new logo for the Latin Culinary Trail.

Designed to celebrate and elevate the diverse Latin and Latin fusion culinary offerings found throughout the destination, the trail connects residents and visitors with a growing collection of restaurants, cafés, food trucks, and bars that reflect the community's authentic heritage.



A Picadera Mixta from Duo Latin Bistro, a restaurant highlighted on the Kissimmee Latin Culinary Trail

"With more than 55% of Osceola County identifying as Hispanic or Latino, our community's culture and cuisine are central to the Kissimmee experience," said DT Minich, president and CEO of Experience Kissimmee. "We are proud of the campaign's success and look forward to creating even more opportunities to spotlight our local small businesses."

In July, Experience Kissimmee assumed full ownership of the program and expanded the trail to 40 participating locations. Since then, the initiative has evolved through in-house content creation, an interactive digital map, social media storytelling, video features, and other marketing efforts designed to drive visitation and support local businesses.

Ocala/Marion County VCB Receives Florida Sports Foundation Award at 2026 Florida Sports Summit

The Ocala/Marion County VCB, in partnership with World Equestrian Center (WEC), was presented with the Mid-Market Sports Tourism Venue of the Year award at the 2026 Florida Sports Summit. The Larry Pendleton Awards Dinner took place on the last day of the Summit at the Bradenton Area Convention Center, closing out three days of celebrating top sports tourism partners from across the state and marking 35 years of the Florida Sports Foundation (FSF).



President & CEO Maicel Green of Florida Sports Foundation, Group Sales Supervisor Corry Locke of Ocala/Marion County VCB, and Founder Larry Pendleton of Florida Sports Foundation



The 2026 NIKE First in Show volleyball tournament at World Equestrian Center in Ocala

In just five years, World Equestrian Center has become a premier hub for sporting events, hosting major events such as the Collegiate Equestrian National Championships, Longines League of Nations, and Nike First in Show Volleyball Showcase. WEC boasts six climate-controlled indoor arenas, 16 outdoor rings, and two state-of-the-art expo centers with 132,300 sq. ft. of contiguous column-free space each. These outstanding, proven venues help Ocala/Marion County's emergence as a top sports tourism destination.



Orlando North, Seminole County Wins Four Telly Awards for Waterway Travel Series

The 47th annual Telly Awards honored Orlando North, Seminole County Tourism for excellence in storytelling, innovation, and destination-focused content creation through its award-winning *ON BOARD* series. The six-episode production earned one Gold and three Silver Telly Awards. Each episode immerses viewers in Seminole County's rivers, lakes, and springs through cinematic adventures led by the local guides, anglers, paddlers, and outdoor enthusiasts who know these waters best.



The *ON BOARD* production team captures Seminole County's waterways for the award-winning travel series that earned four Telly Awards.

ON BOARD was built to do more than showcase pretty scenery. It puts real people and real places at the center of every story, inviting travelers to experience Seminole County as a true outdoor destination. The series has become a cornerstone of the destination's content strategy, proving that authentic, character-driven storytelling can spark curiosity and inspire real travel decisions.



Orlando North, Seminole County's *ON BOARD* series title card featuring host Ned Johnson

"We are extremely proud of the tremendous work our tourism team put into creating *ONBOARD*. Winning a Telly Award is an incredible honor and a testament to the creativity, dedication, and hard work that went into bringing this project to life," said Danny Trosset, tourism division manager for Seminole County.

The recognition places Orlando North among the top DMOs in the country for creative excellence. It also reinforces a simple idea at the heart of the team's work. When you let a community's guides and waterways tell the story, you elevate its distinct sense of place and give visitors a reason to come explore it for themselves.

Lakeland Restaurant Earns First MICHELIN Recommended Recognition for Polk County

An honor long in the making has finally been bestowed upon one of Central Florida's elite culinary destinations: Nineteen61 in Downtown Lakeland has earned MICHELIN Recommended recognition, a first for a restaurant in Polk County.

With a menu highlighting dishes honoring the Cuban, Spanish, Peruvian, and Latin American culinary traditions near and dear to Owner and Executive Chef Marcos Fernandez's heart, Nineteen61 takes its name from a pivotal year in his family's history. When Fernandez opened the restaurant in 2015, he named it in honor of his parents and the year they emigrated from their native Cuba: 1961. Fernandez's journey is a quintessential American success story.



Visit Central Florida's Senior Tourism Sales and Marketing Manager Kris Keprios (left) and newly appointed Director of Tourism and Sports Marketing Neal Duncan (right) present Owner Marcos Fernandez of Nineteen61 with the restaurant's Michelin Recommended award.



Owner Marcos Fernandez of Nineteen61 (center) and his Nineteen61 management team

of all sizes. Together, these ventures have further cemented Fernandez's reputation as a culinary standout in Central Florida.

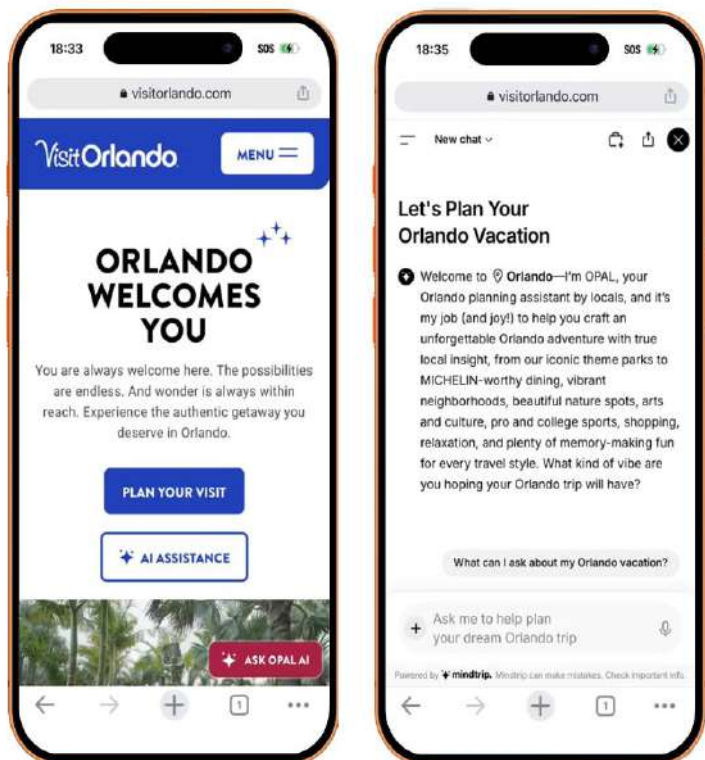
From Nineteen61's roots in Lakeland's Dixieland neighborhood to its current location, Fernandez has expanded his brand to include Vasco61, the rooftop bar above the flagship restaurant overlooking Munn Park, and Banquet61, which caters to groups and events

Nineteen61 is one of many restaurants at the forefront of Visit Central Florida's robust culinary initiative, three years in the making, helping establish Polk County as a must-stop destination along Interstate 4 for even the most discerning dining enthusiast.



Visit Orlando Expands Destination Expertise Through AI-Powered Planning

Visit Orlando is expanding access to its destination expertise through OPAL (Orlando Planning Assistance by Locals), a new artificial intelligence-powered trip planning tool available 24/7 on [VisitOrlando.com](https://www.visitorlando.com). Powered by Mindtrip and trained by local experts, OPAL combines human-curated Orlando knowledge with trusted global travel data from more than 40 sources to deliver personalized recommendations, answer traveler questions, and create custom itineraries based on individual interests and needs.



New AI-powered trip planner joins Visit Orlando's suite of local expert-led services, offering personalized recommendations and easier vacation planning.

The addition of OPAL expands Visit Orlando's suite of free Vacation Planning Services, complementing existing resources such as one-on-one consultations, live chat, and insider guidance from destination experts. Unlike other AI travel tools, OPAL is designed to reflect the same locally informed approach travelers receive from Visit Orlando's vacation planners while highlighting local businesses and experiences throughout the destination.



Visit Orlando's Vacation Planning Services

According to Visit Orlando President & CEO Casandra Matej, the organization is continually expanding ways to connect people to experiences they value most while recognizing the complexity of the Orlando destination. Alongside Visit Orlando's Vacation Planning Services and team of destination experts providing personalized guidance in multiple languages, including Spanish and Portuguese, OPAL represents the latest evolution in how Visit Orlando helps travelers navigate vacation decisions, discover more of the destination, and plan Orlando visits with greater ease and confidence.



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we inform

 **BOOK**
we entice

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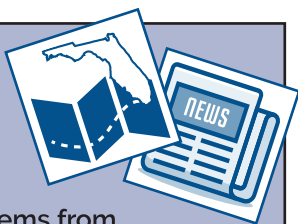
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Want to See Your DMO's News in *Tourism Marketing Today*?

We regularly publish brief news items from DMOs in *Tourism Marketing Today*. News about your staff will appear in our "In the News" section. We also publish "Quick Trips," and they are your opportunity to share your good news! Your story should be about past events, awards, or campaigns to serve as "best practices" for your fellow tourism professionals. Our deadlines typically fall on a Thursday around the middle of each month. If you aren't receiving an email reminder, reach out to Susan Trainor (editor.trainor@gmail.com), and she will add you to the mailing list.



JOIN US FOR THE

2026 Annual Meeting

Wednesday, October 14, 2026

2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Board of Directors Meeting

4:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. Registration Desk Open

5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. Welcome Reception

Thursday, October 15, 2026

8:00 a.m. Registration Desk Open

8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. Networking Breakfast

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Florida Destination Marketing Industry State of the State Report

10:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Networking Break

11:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon Expand Your Spheres of Influence: Leveraging Chamber of Commerce Partnerships for Broader Buy-In

12:00 noon – 1:30 p.m. Networking Luncheon

1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. Beyond Tourism: How DMOs Strengthen the Workforce Pipeline

2:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. Networking Break

3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. Three Essentials That Every Transformative Leader Knows

5:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. Miles Evening Event

Friday, October 16, 2026

8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. Networking Breakfast

9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Destinations Florida Annual Business Meeting
Legislative Update with Mat Forrest

10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. VISIT FLORIDA Marketing Update

12:00 noon Adjourn



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MEETING LOCATION:

Hutchinson Shores Resort

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HOTEL ACCOMMODATIONS:

The Hutchinson Shores Resort is offering a special rate for Destinations Florida Annual Meeting at \$209 per night for Sunset/Pool View rooms, and Oceanfront rooms beginning at \$259 per night. You may make your reservation online using this link: <https://bit.ly/DF26Annual> or call: (877) 502-4653 and mention the group name, Destinations Florida Annual Meeting. **Important: Reservations must be made by Tuesday, September 22, 2026.** Please make your reservation as soon as possible to guarantee availability.

Register at DestinationsFlorida.org



Amelia Island CVB Wins Bronze Telly Award

Amelia Island CVB's *Find Your Unwind* 30-second spot earned a Bronze Telly Award in the General – Travel & Tourism category. Selected from more than 13K global entries, the recognition honors excellence in video and television production. Created in collaboration with Waymack and Crew and Starmark, the spot brings Amelia Island's campaign to life while validating the destination's creative strategy and building momentum for *Find Your Unwind* heading into the next fiscal year. AmeliaIsland.com



Find Your Unwind earns Telly Award.

Brevard County Celebrates First Michelin Recognition

The Space Coast Office of Tourism was proud to present Chef Daniel of Koko Japanese Pub in Cocoa Beach with their official Michelin Recognition. It's beyond inspiring to see a local dream come true. This is the first Michelin recommendation in Brevard County. VisitSpaceCoast.com



Executive Director Peter Cranis of Florida's Space Coast Office of Tourism presents Koko Japanese Pub's Michelin Recognition to Chef Daniel.

Instagram Engagement Continues to Drive Destination Awareness

Florida's Historic Coast continues to grow its social media influence, with Instagram surpassing 100K followers—a 7.3% year-over-year increase. Authentic reels highlighting local restaurants, live music, and America's 250th anniversary generated thousands of views and expanded awareness of the destination. Combined with a highly engaged Facebook audience of more than 628K followers, these results demonstrate how strategic social storytelling inspires travelers, strengthens the brand, and delivers meaningful value for tourism partners. FloridasHistoricCoast.com



Florida's Historic Coast Instagram community surpassed 100K followers this year, with authentic, destination-focused reels generating strong engagement and helping inspire future visitors to experience the destination.

Martin County Invites Travelers to Reconnect Through Sensory Experiences

The Martin County Office of Tourism & Marketing recently launched *Come to Your Senses*, a new integrated marketing campaign designed to inspire travelers to disconnect from digital distractions and reconnect through immersive sensory experiences. Inspired by the concept of synesthesia, the campaign uses evocative storytelling across print, digital, radio, social media, and PR to position Martin County as a restorative destination where visitors can truly slow down, recharge, and indulge their senses. DiscoverMartin.com



Martin County's new campaign leverages playful sensory copy, such as "Sip the Sunset," "Hear the Colors," and "Drink the Daylight."



Visit Sarasota County Focuses on Collaboration, Not Duplication

From spring through early summer, Visit Sarasota County partnered with six regional Chambers of Commerce on a countywide Regional Spotlight Campaign, co-created so each community could tell its own story to prospective visitors. Each Chamber provided messaging that reflected the personality and appeal of its community, encouraging visitors to see Sarasota County not as a single destination, but as a collection of unique places. The campaign generated 9.5M impressions and 36K conversions, and amplified voices of those who know each community inside and out. VisitSarasota.com



The fishing pier in Venice—one of the many municipalities featured in the collaborative Regional Spotlight Campaign in Sarasota County.

Visit Indian River County Wins Graphic Design USA Award

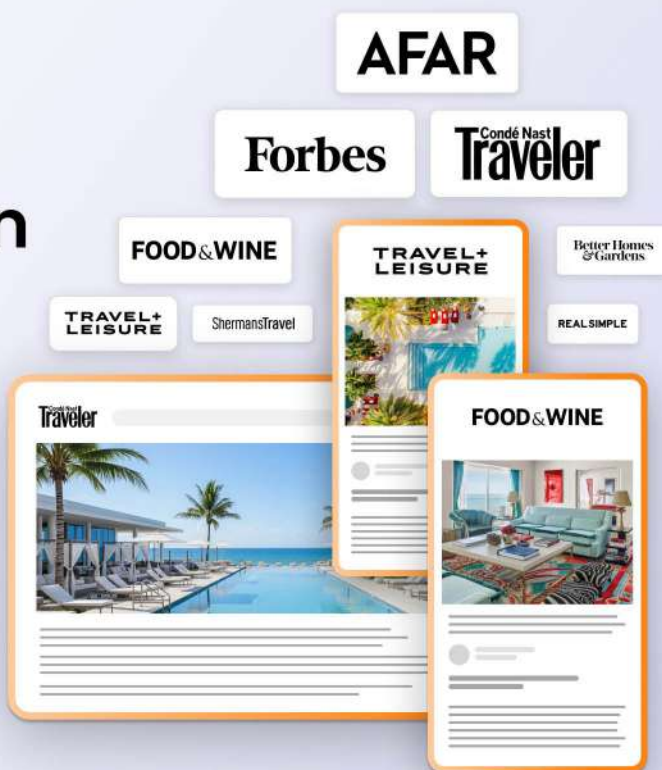
Visit Indian River County has been recognized by Graphic Design USA (GDUSA) in the 2026 American In-House Design Awards. The award-winning campaign received honors in the Integrated Marketing Campaigns category, recognizing a strategic and creative multi-channel effort across Digital Out-of-Home, Email, and Streaming Audio designed to build destination awareness and drive travel consideration among high-value leisure travelers. Leveraging stunning destination photography, compelling messaging, and a unified visual identity, the campaign design showcased the natural beauty, attractions, and experiences that make Indian River County a premier destination in Florida. VisitIndianRiverCounty.com



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Daytona Beach Area CVB Garners Larry Pendleton Partner Award

The Daytona Beach Area CVB was recognized with the Larry Pendleton Partner Award for Best Small Marketing Awarded Event for its outstanding partnership and promotional efforts supporting the National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) & National Dance Alliance (NDA) Collegiate Cheer and Dance Championship. The award, presented by the Florida Sports Foundation during its recent Sports Summit in Bradenton, honors destinations and organizations that demonstrate collaboration, innovation, and marketing excellence in advancing successful sporting events throughout the state. DaytonaBeach.com



Senior Sales Manager Brandon Little of the Daytona Beach Area CVB (center) accepts the Larry Pendleton Partner Award for Best Small Marketing Awarded Event for the NCA & NDA Collegiate Cheer and Dance Championship, which has been held annually in Daytona Beach for nearly three decades.

Photo: Daytona Beach Area CVB

Lake June Lagoon Opens in the Sebring Area

As part of its destination development strategy, Visit Sebring (VS) helped fund the new Lake June Lagoon, which opened early summer in Lake Placid. The project expands opportunities for visitors and residents to experience the area's freshwater lakes while enhancing the destination's outdoor recreation offerings. By investing in unique amenities targeting key need seasons, the VS team continues to strengthen the visitor experience, encourage longer stays, and showcase natural amenities that make the area a distinctive Florida destination. VisitSebring.com



Lake June Lagoon welcomed its first visitors this summer, creating a new way to experience the Sebring area's beautiful freshwater lakes.

Travel Influencers Swim With Weeki Wachee Mermaids

Family travel influencers Our3Dads, whose content reaches more than 147K YouTube subscribers with 645K+ monthly YouTube views, 64K Instagram followers, and 15M+ monthly Instagram views, recently experienced the new Mermaid Experience at Weeki Wachee Springs State Park. The hosted visit showcased the park's iconic underwater heritage to a broad family travel audience. "Hosting creators like Our3Dads helps introduce new audiences to the authentic experiences that make Florida's Adventure Coast unforgettable," said Tammy Heon, manager of tourism development. FloridasAdventureCoast.com



Family travel creators Our3Dads and their crew share a magical moment swimming alongside the legendary Weeki Wachee mermaids during the Mermaid Experience at Weeki Wachee Springs State Park.

Discover Crystal River Florida Supports Firework Shows for America250

Discover Crystal River Florida contributed \$7,500 to America250 celebrations in Crystal River, Homosassa, and Inverness, helping support three fireworks shows commemorating the nation's 250th birthday. The celebrations drew thousands of residents and visitors from across Central Florida to Citrus County, creating memorable community events while showcasing the destination as a place to gather, celebrate, and experience this historic milestone across three of the county's distinctive communities. DiscoverCrystalRiverFL.com



Discover Crystal River Supports America250 Celebrations Across Citrus County.



Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches Launches New Outdoor Activities Guide

In July, Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches launched its new outdoor activities guide. The brochure highlights the destination's wide breadth of attractions including hiking, biking, boating, surfing, and fishing. Information on charters, outfitters, and more is also included in the guide. The brochure is part of the destination's continued focus on ecotourism and aligns with the ongoing *Trails, Tides, and Laid Back Vibes* campaign. VisitFlagler.com



Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches' new outdoor activities guide

From the 1500s, With Love Letter Campaign Inspires Thousands

Visit Pensacola brought its *From the 1500s, With Love America* 250 campaign to life by inviting travelers and residents to share personal love letters to America's First Settlement. The emotionally driven campaign inspired more than 3,500 submissions and strong website and social media engagement, demonstrating the deep connection audiences have with Pensacola. Tourism partners amplified the effort by contributing experiences and more than \$2,500 toward a destination vacation prize. VisitPensacola.com



Visit Pensacola's *From the 1500s, With Love* campaign invited visitors and residents to celebrate their personal connections to America's First Settlement through a destination-wide love letter contest.

Visit Lauderdale Celebrates the Premiere of *Black in Broward* Film Series

Visit Lauderdale hosted the *Black in Broward* film series premiere, bringing the community together to celebrate the stories that shape Greater Fort Lauderdale. Through powerful films and meaningful conversations, the evening highlighted the people, history, and culture that make the destination unique. By elevating these authentic voices, Visit Lauderdale remains committed to telling the stories that inspire visitors, foster connection, and celebrate the richness of the community. VisitLauderdale.com



Vice President of Business Development Neki Mohan of Visit Lauderdale (at right) poses with the story tellers featured in the *Black in Broward* film series.

2026 MICHELIN Guide Florida Recognizes Two Naples Restaurants

Florida's Paradise Coast proudly celebrates a historic milestone as Naples' restaurants Tong Yin and Bicyclette Cookshop earn recognition in the 2026 MICHELIN Guide's Recommended Restaurants list. This first-ever honor for Naples highlights the exceptional talent of the local culinary community while elevating Florida's Paradise Coast as a premier dining destination. The recognition shines an international spotlight on the region's evolving culinary scene, inspiring travelers from across the country and around the world to experience its exceptional cuisine beyond the allure of the Gulf beaches and wildlife adventures. ParadiseCoast.com



Sandra Rios (left) and John Melleky (right) of the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades CVB present Chef June Dispongso of Tong Yin and Chef Kayla Pfeiffer of Bicyclette Cookshop their MICHELIN plaques in recognition of their restaurants earning coveted placements in the 2026 MICHELIN Guide's Recommended Restaurants list.



Experience Kissimmee Launches *Bora Pra Kissimme!* Season Two

Experience Kissimmee launched the highly anticipated second season of *Bora Pra Kissimme!* featuring Brazilian celebrities enjoying incredible vacations and creating memories in Kissimmee, Florida. The four new personalities, each with a different visitor profile, take viewers on exciting adventures throughout the destination and share the inside scoop on all things Kissimmee. Last season, the series generated 17.4M views and \$2.7M in media value. Check out their website and social media for more! ExperienceKissimmee.com



Content creator Theodoros stars in the first episode of *Bora Pra Kissimme!*

Columbia County TDC Releases Reimagined Visitor Guide

The Columbia County TDC has unveiled its official visitor guide, a fresh, modern resource designed to help travelers discover Lake City and Columbia County, also known as Florida's Springlands. Reimagined from the ground up, it builds on previous visitor resources with a comprehensive new guide, creating a seamless print-to-digital visitor experience. The visitor guide highlights the destination's renowned freshwater springs, outdoor recreation, historic downtown, local dining, shopping, accommodations, signature events, sports facilities, and wedding opportunities, giving travelers an inspiring introduction to Columbia County. LakeCityFL.com



Out With the Old, In With the New!

As the saying goes, "Out with the old, in with the new!" Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach has officially refreshed its destination brand, transitioning from Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach VCB to Visit Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach. The new name reflects a modern, visitor-focused identity that is simpler, more recognizable, and aligned with today's travel marketing trends. Along with the rebrand comes a new logo that represents the destination's refreshed identity and continued commitment to showcasing the area's unique experiences, natural beauty, and welcoming community. PureFlorida.com



Introducing the new Visit Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach logo!

Lakeland Hosts Miss Florida Pageant for Tenth Year

The Miss Florida and Miss Florida's Teen Scholarship Competition returned to Lakeland for year 10, June 22–27. Polk County and Winter Haven native Alexandra de Roos, Miss Manatee, earned the crown and will compete in the 2027 Miss America Pageant. She will promote her initiative, The Blue Project: Integrating Neuroscience and the Arts, Inc., exploring how art can address the physical and emotional effects of traumatic brain injuries. Sheridan Delegal was crowned Miss Florida's Teen. VisitCentralFlorida.org



Alexandra de Roos is crowned Miss Florida 2027 during the Miss Florida and Miss Florida's Teen Scholarship Competition in Lakeland. De Roos and Miss Florida's Teen Sheridan Delegal will represent the Sunshine State at the Miss America and Miss America's Teen competitions, respectively, in West Palm Beach in September.



Miami Spice Celebrates 25 Years of Culinary Tourism

Celebrating its 25th anniversary, the Greater Miami CVB's Miami Spice Restaurant Months continues driving visitation and supporting local restaurants through specially priced dining experiences at more than 400 participating restaurants across Greater Miami and Miami Beach. New this year, Miami Spice Reserve showcases elevated culinary experiences while expanded sustainability partnerships promote local sourcing, food waste reduction, composting, and food rescue initiatives. Together, the program highlights how destination marketing can strengthen local businesses while advancing environmental stewardship and community impact. MiamiandMiamiBeach.com



Dining with purpose: Every Miami Spice meal creates an opportunity to help provide food and shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

St. Pete-Clearwater Celebrates 727 Day

July 27 was another special day for St. Pete-Clearwater as they celebrated the "best area code in the country" with 727 Day and highlighted the value of tourism. Residents were treated to more than 170 deals from the hospitality industry and beyond, as well as a free cup of Kahwa Coffee on July 27, to thank them for being fantastic hosts to the millions of annual visitors to St. Pete-Clearwater. In total, there were more than 54K webpage visits with more than 10K mobile passport signups, 3,500 exclusive T-shirts distributed, and the campaign generated more than 80 local media mentions. VisitStPeteClearwater.com



Discover Lake County Sponsors Girls Basketball Finals

From July 24–27, Discover Lake County sponsored the NXTPRO Pro16 League girls finals. Teams from across North America, including as far as Alaska, traveled to Tavares for the culmination of Puma's grassroots basketball circuit. The star-studded teams featured the top athletes from the next generation of women's basketball battling it out in front of legendary coaches like Kim Mulkey and Dawn Staley at this NCAA Live Period event. The four-day event had a projected 12K visitors and economic impact of \$1.7M. DiscoverLakeCountyFL.com



Elite athletes compete in the NXTPRO Pro16 League girls finals.

Visit Jacksonville Hosts First Tourism Summit

Visit Jacksonville hosted its inaugural Tourism Summit on June 18 at the Florida Blue Conference Center, welcoming nearly 100 attendees for a day of learning, collaboration, and networking. Local tourism and marketing experts led sessions on community partnerships, event promotion, visitor data, destination marketing, content creation, and Visit Jacksonville's travel strategy. The Summit also featured a State of Jacksonville Tourism presentation and panel, providing attendees with insights, practical resources, and opportunities to strengthen Jacksonville's tourism community. VisitJacksonville.com



President & CEO Michael Corrigan of Visit Jacksonville provides a State of Jacksonville Tourism update at the Jacksonville Tourism Summit.

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National Oyster Day Competition Celebrates Panama City's Oyster Culture

Destination Panama City celebrated National Oyster Day with the second annual Oyster Eating Competition at Hunt's Oyster Bar. The event drew a record number of competitors, including participants traveling from across the Southeast, who collectively consumed more than 1K oysters. The competition is part of Destination Panama City's broader effort to celebrate the city's oyster heritage and promote the Panama City Oyster Trail, encouraging visitors to experience the local restaurants and traditions that have shaped Panama City's oyster culture. DestinationPanamaCity.com



Competitors dig in at the second annual Oyster Eating Competition at Hunt's Oyster Bar during Destination Panama City's National Oyster Day celebration. Photo: © Destination Panama City

The Palm Beaches Celebrate 2026 MICHELIN Guide Honorees

Discover The Palm Beaches celebrated the destination's 10 restaurants recognized in the 2026 MICHELIN Guide during a special event on Aug. 3. Restaurant partners, elected officials, and hospitality leaders gathered to honor the chefs and teams helping to elevate The Palm Beaches' culinary reputation and visitor appeal. Highlights included Emelina earning a MICHELIN Star, becoming the first Cuban restaurant in the world to receive the distinction. ThePalmBeaches.com



Discover The Palm Beaches' leadership with 2026 MICHELIN Guide restaurant honorees

Record 188 Restaurants Participating in Visit Orlando's Magical Dining

A record 188 restaurants are participating in Visit Orlando's Magical Dining, presented by Orlando Health, making it the largest program in its history. The lineup includes 38 new restaurants, 16 MICHELIN Guide-recognized restaurants, and the program's first Michelin-starred restaurant. Beyond showcasing Orlando's growing culinary scene, the annual program continues its community impact by supporting OCA (Opportunity, Community, Ability) and six Orange County nonprofits. Since 2009, Visit Orlando's Magical Dining has raised nearly \$3.3M for local nonprofits. VisitOrlando.org



Through Sept. 30, diners enjoy three-course prix-fixe menus during Visit Orlando's Magical Dining, presented by Orlando Health, while supporting local nonprofits. Learn more at OrlandoMagicalDining.com.

Visit Tampa Bay and Hillsborough County Public Schools Expand Hospitality Education Programs

Visit Tampa Bay and Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) celebrated a major milestone at a ribbon-cutting Aug. 6 for the expansion of hospitality and tourism education at Jefferson High School, now the district's first Magnet School of Hospitality and Tourism. The event also celebrated a newly enhanced Hospitality and Tourism Classroom at Sumner High School, sponsored by TECO. HCPS, in partnership with Visit Tampa Bay, is expanding the Travel and Tourism programs at Jefferson and Sumner High Schools this school year to help inspire and prepare the next generation of hospitality professionals. The programs build career pathways for students in one of the region's most vital industries. VisitTampaBay.com



A hospitality-themed mural from Tampa Bay artist Dylan Perry decorates the wall of one of Jefferson High School's Hospitality and Tourism classrooms. Guests toured the classroom following a ribbon-cutting ceremony Aug. 6 commemorating the school's designation as Hillsborough County's first Magnet School of Hospitality and Tourism.



Walton County Tourism Wins Two Silver Telly Awards for Travel & Tourism

Walton County Tourism earned two Silver Telly Awards in the Travel & Tourism category for its exceptional video storytelling. At the 47th annual ceremony, WCT was recognized for *In the Kitchen with South Walton*, a video series showcasing the area's rich culinary scene and local chefs that make Walton County a must-visit dining destination, as well as *Happily Ever After Begins Here*, which highlights South Walton as a premier wedding and romantic getaway destination. WaltonCountyFLTourism.com



In the Kitchen with South Walton provides viewers with a behind-the-scenes look at South Walton's thriving culinary experiences.

Visit Panama City Beach Wins 11 SunSational Awards

Visit Panama City Beach was honored with 11 SunSational Awards at this year's Florida Festivals and Events Association (FFEA) Convention, recognizing the creativity, innovation, and dedication behind some of the destination's most celebrated events. From the swashbuckling excitement of Pirates of the High Seas & Renaissance Festival to the high-flying Gulf Coast Salute Air Show and the coastal flavors of UNwineD Presented by Publix, Visit Panama City Beach is proud to see these events recognized at the state level. VisitPanamaCityBeach.com



Visit Panama City Beach extends congratulations to their Events team and all of their partners who help bring their SunSational Award-winning experiences to life, and look forward to continuing to create memorable events in Panama City Beach.

Destin, Okaloosa County Expand Public Beach Access

The city of Destin and Okaloosa County have expanded public beach access with the opening of Tarpon Beach Gulf Front Park, a \$16.96M project funded through tourism revenue. Located along Scenic Highway 98, a half mile from the destination's Little Adventures Outpost, the new beachfront park adds 340 feet of public access, free parking, rest rooms, and four pavilions. The project underscores the community's ongoing investment in preserving Destin's iconic shoreline while creating more opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy the beautiful beaches and Gulf. DestinFWB.com



Tarpon Beach Gulf Front Park brings 340 feet of new public beach access to Destin, creating an additional access point to enjoy the area's iconic shoreline.

Ocala/Marion County Embraces America 250 With FAM Tour and Patriotic Events

In celebration of America 250, the Ocala/Marion County VCB launched the "Explore Your Freedom" multimedia campaign. As part of the initiative, the VCB welcomed regional journalists on an immersive FAM tour highlighting the destination's classic Americana experiences, complementing a regional satellite media tour inspiring summer vacation. The America 250 spirit was further amplified by the countywide Marion Celebrates 250 initiative, which featured community events leading up to the vibrant Patriotic Parade and four extravagant fireworks shows. OcalaMarion.com



Left: Spectators watch countywide Marion Celebrates 250 fireworks. Right: Ocala/Marion County VCB FAM attendees visit GoldMark Farm.



Quick Trips!

A Fresh Connection Between Tourism and Local Farms

Alachua County is connecting hospitality businesses with local agriculture through the new Fresh Food Pathways Pilot Project. In partnership with Frog Song Farms, the pilot provides a single point of contact for locally grown products that can add a distinctly Gainesville touch to hotel breakfasts, welcome baskets, guest amenities, retail, and events. The initiative offers a new way for tourism businesses to support local farms while incorporating the region's agricultural identity into the visitor experience. For more information contact Bailey McClellan at bmcclellan@alachuacounty.gov. VisitGainesville.com



Locally grown produce, like fresh local tomatoes, create a flavorful connection between Alachua County farms and the hospitality businesses that welcome visitors.

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As a member benefit for you, Destinations Florida has retained Steven M. Hogan with the Ausley McMullen law firm to provide insight into the operation of the TDT and related issues to Destinations Florida.

There are several situations where it would be helpful for you to have a legal opinion for your community. As a member benefit, you can speak with Mr. Hogan about the facts and laws at a general level.

To take advantage of this program, feel free to reach out to Steve Hogan at the information below:



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