



AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES? WE'VE GOT THAT.

Company travel, leisure vacations ditch by-the-book itineraries.

RIP the business convention confined to a 300-seat hotel ballroom with a podium up front and catered buffet across the hall.

Goodbye, family vacation with a premeditated checklist.

Travel industry leaders say post-COVID corporate and leisure travelers in North Carolina want destination meetings and the trip that isn't trapped.

"The top travel trend nationally is to be meaningful and memorable," says Cass Herrington, public relations manager of Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau. "And be inspired. Because a trip is expected to be a break from the day-to-day."

While groups may still have an inspirational speaker, training session or

updates on industry trends, they are also bonding away from the hotel conference rooms. And leisure travelers want to have an open calendar they fill in once they learn about the area's offerings.

"It's a new mindset as the growing millennial segment looks for more experiences," says Kevin McAteer, senior vice president of marketing and sales for Concord Hospitality, a hotel management and ownership company.

"Groups want to socialize and connect with colleagues and friends through outdoor team-building options and entertainment and food and beverage activities. We are seeing groups of all sizes choosing to rent out bar /restaurant spaces for hospitality functions versus past traditions of booking

such an event in a ballroom setting."

Today's travelers want to get to know the local area they're visiting.

"When people travel, they want more than the manufactured kind of tourism that doesn't feel real or even diminishes the cultural narrative of a place," says Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit NC, which will soon unveil its state tourism campaign in Asheville. "Instead, they are looking for ways to experience a new place to the fullest by making a real connection — a genuine, local and authentic connection."

Groups still enjoy a beautiful hotel, but it must have options beyond its walls.

"Meeting planners and convention planners are being drawn to hotels that have a full staff of professionals that are

Look for some of our Daily Digest readers' favorite North Carolina destinations throughout this section.

available and ready to assist with every need — from timely calls to answering any questions the client has, to ensuring hotels are being creative to bring uniqueness to their events,” McAteer said.

Herrington says Asheville’s CVB issued 425 leads last year resulting in more than 65,000 room nights. As of mid-January, it had booked five major-industry group events for 2023, most in the outdoors-and-wilderness genre.

“We help them coordinate their itinerary, like if they want a guided hike, or team-building activity, or kayaking, or if members want their own personalized itinerary,” she says.

When the American Institute of Graphic Arts met recently in Asheville, one company held its meeting at Citizen Vinyl, a record-pressing business and recording studio with a full menu, coffee and cocktail bars. Another group met at downtown’s Center for Craft, an artists’ fellowship and exhibition venue with event and meeting spaces to seat five to 120.



Asheville’s charming downtown includes Citizen Vinyl (top left), in the Citizen-Times Building that housed newspaper offices, and the Center for Craft (top right), in a building dating to 1912.



Picturesque New Bern was North Carolina’s first capital and is famous as the birthplace of Pepsi.

MEETING TRAVELERS’ NEEDS ACROSS THE STATE

This trend of travelers wanting local experiences is true across the state.

Raleigh-based Association Executives of North Carolina provides its 800-plus members in the hospitality industries with professional development and networking opportunities.

“I can definitely say, without question, the biggest trend we’re seeing right now is that people are traveling for meetings and conventions and looking for great experiences for their members, their customers, their employees, even their families,” says Rich Phaneuf, the group’s CEO. “They want to go to a destination that, when they leave, they can say it was a great experience. Part of that is having North Carolina cities show their area — not just the hotel, but how awesome the town is, like ballgames or theater.”



No. 4 golf course at Pinehurst Resort

In Craven County, where the Neuse River waterfront area is a draw, leisure travel has seen record-breaking months, says Melissa Riggle, executive director of Visit New Bern. Convention business, she says, “has new life breathed back into it, and business travel has come back. We have a lot of industry around here, and it’s returned to pre-pandemic levels.”

New Bern was clobbered by Hurricane Florence in September 2018, with many hotels and other buildings, including the convention center, requiring renovations.

“It was definitely a lot to come through, but we did it,” she says. “We’ve refocused our marketing efforts on what we’re doing, so we’re advertising in national magazines and have really cast our net wider to piggy-back on the trend for coastal visits.”

The virtual meeting via Zoom and even hybrid gatherings with the options to stay home or attend in person are in the rearview mirror.

“Planners are wanting in-person meetings again. There’s a different feel

to that, a camaraderie,” Riggle says. “With the actual meeting, there’s also a bigger interest in optional activities. People are traveling in a day earlier and really getting a feel and flavor of their destination.”

The New Bern CVB team creates experiences for individuals and groups that include trolley packages with lunch, golf lessons with local pros, scenic river cruises and waterfront dining.

“We’re surrounded by two rivers, and people really enjoy that. It’s totally walkable and people are enjoying that,” Riggle says. “And our restaurants and bars – we have a beer and wine culture that’s really popular.”

Local flavors and natural resources are key in the tourism comeback.

“We have been incredibly fortunate over the last few years,” says Tuttell. “Our mountain and coastal areas have seen tremendous increases in visitation and visitor spending. While urban areas suffered from the loss of business travel and meetings, they wisely pivoted to attract more leisure travelers. Golf has

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TOP PLACES TO VISIT IN NC

“Ocracoke Island for the beaches--My 6 year old and 2 year old can run on isolated beaches all day long.

Banner Elk in the summer--The weather is just superb and the local parks are outstanding.”

-Clark Twiddy, Duck

also had quite the resurgence and that has benefitted areas across the state.”

In the Pinehurst-Southern Pines-Aberdeen area where golf is king, the Country Club of North Carolina will host the ACC Men’s Golf Championship next month and Pinehurst No. 2 will have the U.S. Open Championship in June 2024. Leisure travel has escalated since COVID.

“Leisure golf travel picked up a lot of momentum for a variety of reasons, mostly due to a global resurgence in the game of golf, and that trend was tailor-made for the golf industry and destinations such as Pinehurst,” says Phil Werz, president and CEO of the CVB for Pinehurst, Southern Pines, Aberdeen.

“This has led to huge leisure demand and a shift in business strategy, specifically at Pinehurst Resort. Pre-pandemic (hotel rooms) were a ratio of 55% business/convention to 45% leisure/social. Now, it’s more like 68%

leisure/social to 32% business.”

Within that business travel, some groups are booking one to two years out, but with the current uncertainty of the global market, others are planning just three months ahead.

“But with booking windows that tight, it is tough to find availability, due to demand,” Werz says.

Whether the Pinehurst resort area is booked for a tournament, business or vacations, travelers have a common denominator.

“It’s definitely different than it was just three short years ago,” Werz says. “Leisure demand is off the charts and corporate wants to come back, but the demand for leisure is so great that we have to protect the majority of our room inventory for the leisure guests. The leisure guest tends to spend more. The leisure guest plays golf or goes to the spa every day they are staying. They book the hotel



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ASHEVILLE

EVER EVOLVING, ALWAYS INSPIRING

Surrounded by the breathtaking beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Asheville is defined by its creative spirit and rugged independence. Asheville is a hotbed of homegrown brands and distinctive experiences, drawing in purpose driven companies with a welcoming creative community prime for group gatherings.

AshevilleMeetings.com

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rooms, they dine and have beverages and they take home a souvenir or several to remember the trip.”

While the corporate travelers are in meetings and seminars most of the time at the hotels, they are venturing out, too.

“[Business travelers] are looking to take in more of the ‘local flavor’ when they go off-site for a meeting, convention or to entertain some clients,” Werz says. “I think that what we have added here at Pinehurst has helped us keep their attention with amenities like The Cradle [a short course] and Pinehurst Brewing Company. We always have our deep history, too, that people tend to uncover a little bit at a time over repeat visits.

“We are a little more unique in that, when you come here, you are more looking to slow down and relax. Take some time to have a drink and talk to your friends/co-workers while sitting in a rocking chair.”

“We moved to Boone 43 years ago, and Watauga County is a great place to live and raise kids. Have you eaten at **Local**? Best moderate priced restaurant around, IMHO.

I would give a shout out for the **Atlantis Lodge**, near Atlantic Beach, as a great place for a beach getaway, especially for us dog lovers. Their tagline, ‘The Atlantis isn’t retro--it’s authentic’ is apt. Family owned and operated.”

-Ray Karaus, Boone



HERE, HISTORY MEETS HISTORY IN THE MAKING

DistiNctly Fayetteville is responsible for positioning Fayetteville/Cumberland County as a destination for conventions, sporting events, and individual travel. It is the tourism marketing arm of Fayetteville/Cumberland County, fueled by research-based marketing.

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“Come look at Waynesville, Haywood County and eat at the **Blue Rooster** (never on Saturday or Sunday).

— Robert Earnest, Waynesville

TECHNOLOGY AND HEALTH AMENITIES ARE HIGH PRIORITY

Having time to slow down and relax, industry leaders say, means having faster technology to avoid hassles from the time it takes to check in to logging on to Wi-Fi.

“As we see the continued resurgence of business travel, it’s critical to create a burden-free guest experience by making their stay as convenient and streamlined as possible,” McAteer says. “Properties have made a key investment in technology such as mobile check-in, mobile guest messaging and mobile amenity/upgrade offers that allow guests to instantly craft their ideal stay.

“While travel has increased, the booking window continues to be short-term, which puts a focus on our digital teams to make sure our mobile sites are up to date and robust with information that addresses the needs of today’s traveler.”

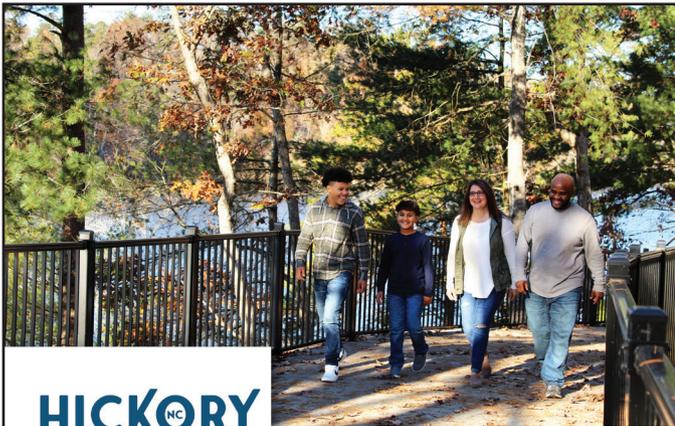
McAteer says travelers also are more focused on fitness options and maintaining a health-conscious routine while away.

“The focus on health has risen significantly compared to what it was two years back, making on-the-road health

and wellness a prominent travel need in this era,” he says. “As a result, many guests now have an elevated expectation that hoteliers will help them maintain their wellness regimens via the latest fitness equipment, exercise programs, property design features, nutritional offerings and more.”

He says the concept of “b-leisure,” combining business travel with vacation activities, is a trend that’s here to stay.

“Our hotel teams need to anticipate that corporate travelers will seek an extended stay more often. The best hotels for business travelers will be the ones that offer the optimal work-from-the-hotel environment, while also providing perks for personal time and entertainment at the hotel or in the market,” he says. “Having our teams knowledgeable about attractions and fun unique tours to experience is an expectation moving forward.”



HICKORY
@VisitHickoryMetro

CRAFTSMANSHIP & CONNECTEDNESS

Hickory’s uniquely local vibe of craftsmanship and connectedness is what makes it a welcoming place for residents and visitors alike. In Hickory, the good life isn’t just about having a lot to do – it’s about how to experience it. Hickory has transformed with a renovated downtown, new City Walk & River Walk, growing culinary scene, and outdoor adventures for every age.

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rockymountevents.com

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BEAUTIFUL PLACE TO VISIT IN NC

One of my long time favorites is **Doughton Park** at The Bluffs on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Wilkes (almost Alleghany) County. It is a beautifully pastoral setting perched on the ridge overlooking the Yadkin Valley. There is a large park-like area at the Bluffs for hiking, picnicking, camping, riding bikes and even letting the dog run.

Most of the hiking there would not be too strenuous on your knees but, for those up for a serious trek, there are trails that go down the mountain and back up, one of which is to a small cabin way down (800+ ft? elev) which you can spot from an overlook near the parking area. And, if you forget to bring your own food, you can always have a fantastic lunch or dinner at the **Bluffs Cafe** (except in the winter!). Check it out!

— Mike Gwyn, Winston-Salem

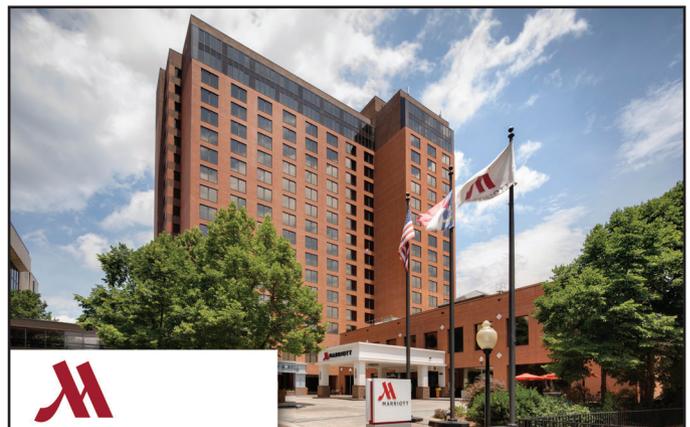


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CONTINUING TO GET HEADS IN BEDS

Though North Carolina collected \$16.1 million in tourist spending in 2021, keeping the momentum has its challenges, Tuttell says.

"While fewer Americans now say that inflation in consumer prices has led them to cancel an upcoming trip, that is still a concern for dampening travel," he says. "Our research shows that 28.7% of people say that inflation has led them to cancel a trip. Gas prices are still a concern and a majority of Americans believe we will enter a recession this year."

As COVID concerns lessen, international travel is on the rise again. While this is good news for North Carolina tourism that attracts international visitors, it also means more competition for domestic travelers who are looking to

leave the country, he added.

But North Carolina, "holds up well in the face of all these challenges," Tuttell says.

"We are centrally located – good for high gas prices – and known for our natural scenic beauty, seen as a safe place for visitors, and not seen as expensive," he says. "We need to keep our marketing focused and targeted. The challenge we have is that the traveler mindset really hasn't stabilized since the start of the pandemic. So we have to keep monitoring what will inspire people as it changes."

Tuttell says Visit NC will use "a more surgical approach" going forward, targeting designated marketing areas – including specific ZIP codes – to create "relevancy and familiarity with seasonality and segments, and go after

higher-spending travelers who also practice sustainable travel practices."

"As an industry where the trends are so strong, we've got to create awesome experiences," says Phaneuf of Association Executives. "We have the people to provide the service, we have the venues to make it enjoyable outside and the venues to make it enjoyable inside."

He added that the tourism organizations in each city and region are strong, and know how to adjust to changing trends and different travel audiences.

Werz says the Pinehurst-Southern Pines-Aberdeen Area CVB tracks monthly occupancy, average daily rate and occupancy tax collections, and all three metrics are well above pre-COVID levels.

"As of November, we have recorded 21 straight months of record occupancy



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LOOK FORWARD, TRAVEL BACK

Visit Winston-Salem is the official sales and marketing organization responsible for marketing greater Winston-Salem as a premier tourism destination for the economic benefit of the community. Visit Winston-Salem is responsible for developing and implementing strategic destination campaigns to increase leisure visitation, conventions, and sporting events in Winston-Salem.

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tax collections, and occupancy annually is about 65% to 70%, which is remarkable and above most successful destinations comparable to us," he says. "When you add to the mix the growth we are experiencing in Moore County, the USGA [United States Golf Association] building its second headquarters here with Golf House Pinehurst and the return of the World Golf Hall of Fame, there isn't a better time to be in this destination."

In New Bern, Riggle says, "We saw an increase in our visitor traffic of more than 50% last year compared to 2021. So we were up 50% in 2022, which is strong. Our occupancy (date) collections show our hotels and BNBs continue to see sellouts."

"As you consider places to visit to highlight, please consider **Salisbury**. I'm biased because Cheryl and I live right on the square in this historic town. Cheryl owns **Pottery 101** (all Carolina potters) and, like shopkeepers 200 years ago, we live in an apartment upstairs. Salisbury has a vibrant downtown with local shops, really good food, and entertainment. Our favorite foods right downtown include **Salty Caper** (pizza), **Jasmine's** (cajun), **Shuckin' Shack**, **Wong's**, **Santo's**, **La Cava**.... Salisbury has two great craft breweries. It's a town with a rich history, museum, arts, and beautiful, historic homes. All walkable."

-Ted W. Goins, Jr., Salisbury



DISTINCTIVE DESTINATIONS

North Carolina is known across the state and world for places and experiences that are hard to duplicate elsewhere.

“Obviously, we have the Biltmore Estate and the Blue Ridge Parkway. There’s also breweries, more than 60 in the area, and each one has its own personality,” Herrington in Asheville says. “But nature also fits well into this trend we’re seeing, with groups and conferences wanting to incorporate more experiences. Up here in the mountains, the stillness can be so powerful.”

A new draw in Asheville is themed hotels that reflect the 1920s and early ‘30s.

“Hotels that are opening are destinations within themselves,” she says.

“The Radical [opening this summer] in the River District has the rustic side, and the Flat Iron Hotel [opening later 2023] has a [basement] speakeasy and rooftop bar. These are hotels that reflect back to the 1920s.”

In New Bern, Riggle notes, “We don’t have Coke. We have Pepsi. We have the pharmacy where it was created.

“You can still go to the pharmacy counter and order a Pepsi. And two miles east of us is Havelock, the military community. It’s a unique meeting venue as well.”

Werz says sales records show his area also is popular outside of golf, with hotels such as the Hampton Garden Inn and Hampton Inn and Suites seeing “very little if any golf-related groups.” Military has been a steady customer. As with other

travel groups, he says, time is important – activities and restaurants that can accommodate a tight agenda.

“I’m so excited right now about N.C. travel,” Phaneuf says. “Looking at what’s transpired over the past year, I think 2023 could be our best year ever.”

Tuttell dubs North Carolina as authentic listing key characteristics: “Our welcoming people, our unique experiences, our incredible scenic beauty.”

He also makes a nod to the state motto.

“Esse Quam Videri - emphasizes the value we place on being, rather than seeming. Here you can take the time to soak it in without worrying about checking things off the so-called ‘to-do’ list,” Tuttell says. “Nothing is manufactured or fake, and around every corner there is a new opportunity to discover, to make those genuine connections, to experience what’s real.” ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.

CRAFTSMANSHIP & CONNECTEDNESS

Hickory’s uniquely local vibe of craftsmanship and connectedness is what makes it a welcoming place for residents and visitors alike. In Hickory, the good life isn’t just about having a lot to do - it’s about how to experience it. Hickory has transformed with a renovated downtown, new City Walk & River Walk, growing culinary scene, and outdoor adventures for every age.



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—Will Mahone, Lake Gaston-area



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