

Ram Cat Alley in Seneca is a favorite stop for tour buses making their rounds in Oconee County. Visitors spend on average about $135 per day shopping and eating out when they tour the county.

FOR THE JOURNAL

Tour buses bring business to Oconee

55 visitors on one-day trip could generate up to $7,500

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

Places such as Stumphouse Mountain and Issaqueena Falls that many of us who live in Oconee County often take for granted are attracting busloads of sightseers.

Shirley Garrett of Sunshine Travel & Express near Columbia said her company has had two tours in Oconee so far this year, and she expects more trips to be booked.

Tours usually include a stop at the World of Energy owned and operated by Duke Energy, a visit to The Lunney Museum, shopping and lunch at Ram Cat Alley, or a boat ride on Lake Jocassee.

"People love it," Garrett said. "There is so much they don't know and haven't heard or seen about (Oconee).

Ken Sloan, who heads the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau for Oconee, said his goal was to have four bus tours last year. He ended up with eight. Sloan said the total of tours is up to 12.

The county attracts bus tour operators by inviting them to an expense-paid familiarization tour. According to Sloan, the "fam-tours" are intended to give media writers and tour operators the opportunity to experience first-hand accommodations, points of interest and restaurants.

"If they like what they see, they'll organize tours and bring tourists into the county for one to three days," Sloan said.

Sloan said Whitney Ellis markets the bus tours by attending three industry conferences each year.

"Once we get them here and get to do a little one-on-one marketing, it opens up opportunities," Sloan said. "They come and experience what we offer, love it and want to come back."

Garrett said Ellis has been a big help in putting together packages that she in turn offers for group trips.

"She knows the area much better than I do," Garrett said. "She's a big asset."

Garrett said her company has to book a minimum of 25 clients for a bus tour to cover costs and turn a profit.

Sloan said each trip brings about 30 to 55 tourists to the area, and each person spends on average close to $135 per day. He said the economic impact to Oconee from the tours is about $4,000 to $7,500 per day.

Sloan said the county would like to expand on the success of the bus tours by adding educational tours tailored for students from fifth to 10th grade.

"We have a whole curriculum lined up," he said.



PHOTOS FOR THE JOURNAL

Proterra in Greenville will create Seneca's electric buses. The hope is that this project will create more jobs at the Proterra plant and continue to lower the state's unemployment number.