Tourism hotspots assured focus on hidden gems won't overlook them

By Dan Burley
The Island Packet

Much of South Carolina's revamped tourism marketing campaign encourages travelers to visit the state's "undiscovered" destinations — rural areas away from Charleston, Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head Island.

But tourism officials and state lawmakers assured an audience on Hilton Head Island that the state's bigger destinations won't be forgotten as the campaign moves forward.

"Not everybody who visits South Carolina is interested in golfing or going to the beach," said state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg. "But we won't forget the goose that lays the golden egg."

Lawmakers, tourism officials and industry vendors met at the Hilton Head Marriott Resort & Spa for the first day of the Governor's Conference on Tourism and Travel.

The event continued through Wednesday, when Gov. Nikki Haley was to deliver an update on the status of the industry, which pumps $18 billion into the state's economy, according to Duane Parrish, director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

On Monday, Parrish spoke before a crowd of about 200, detailing what he called an industry fully recovered from the recession.

"We're beating pre-recession numbers, and I don't see us slowing down," he said.

For fiscal year 2013, key tourism indicators, including revenue per available lodging room, admissions-tax revenues and state park revenues all set records, he said.

"We're putting heads in beds, feet on fairways and people in parks at a record pace," he said.

Hoping to piggyback off the record-setting year, Bluffton-based BFG Communications presented an update on its $2.5 million, state-funded media campaign aimed at attracting visitors within a 350-mile driving distance of lesser-known areas.

The campaign encourages visitors to go to smaller towns often bypassed on the way to more traditional tourist destinations, including state parks, drive-ins, and rural attractions such as the Cherokee Foothills Trail and Jocassee Gorges.

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"We're really looking at those off-the-beaten-path spots," chief research officer Kyle Langley said.

Among other advertising videos, BFG showed the crowd a series of vignettes chronicling barbecue restaurants around the state. The barbecue angle is a "creative hook to get people to discover something new," according to state tourism department sales and marketing director Beverly Shelley.

Though the campaign shifts eyes away from Beaufort County's beaches and golf courses, state Rep. Shannon Erickson, R-Beaufort, said the marketing strategy, when tied with advertising from more established tourist destinations, will improve the tourism market as a whole.

"We're trying to tie together those layers of tourism," she said. "How many people when visiting our beaches also know to stop by the (Gullah) Farmers Cooperative on St. Helena's Island? Or the Spanish Moss Trail?"

Rep. Cobb-Hunter said the goal isn't to hinder coastal tourism destinations. Instead, she wants attractions in her area to emulate how Beaufort County's hotels and golf courses advertise.

"Because you're so successful down here, let's try taking that to the undiscovered aspects of the state," she said. "There's plenty of rich history to go around."



The beauties of Jocassee Gorges are among the lesser-known attractions a state tourism campaign is highlighting. STAFF / FILE