Can Cultural Tourism Make a Splash in Georgia’s Economy?

The whale sharks swimming in the new Georgia Aquarium are just the first big catch the state’s economic developers are hoping to land. They’re counting on the aquarium and other cultural attractions to haul in big bucks from a rising trend—cultural and heritage tourism.

On a clear, crisp November morning, a spry 76-year-old billionaire bounded around his $250 million-plus fish tank like a do-it-yourselfer at Home Depot for the first time.

When he sat, Bernie (Bernard) Marcus, the benefactor behind the sprawling new Georgia Aquarium, spoke rapid fire, in one 15-minute interview after another. As quicksilver blue runners darted past in giant tanks in the wall behind him, the Home Depot co-founder described the economics behind one of the newest and shiniest attractions in Georgia’s tourism portfolio.

More than simply a place for people to ogle exotic fish, the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta is an attraction that the state’s business boosters believe will lure tourists the way a coral reef draws fish. Those tourists will, in turn, spend money at other area attractions, restaurants, and hotels.

Marcus carefully considered the economic energy the aquarium might create as well as the everyday economics of operating the 550,000 square-foot building. “From the very beginning, I was determined to make sure this would be economically viable,” he said.

Reeling in the tourists

Marcus envisions his “gift to the people of Atlanta and Georgia” as the anchor tourist attraction the city has lacked. Georgia economic development officials, including Gov. Sonny Perdue, tout the aquarium among several new and upgraded attractions they hope will juice the state’s tourism industry. When the aquarium opened in November 2005, Craig Lesser, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Economic Development, said it supported the governor’s vision of “a total economic development effort that includes a thriving tourism industry.”

A thriving tourism industry might help spark the state’s economy, especially as some traditional economic sectors in Georgia stumble (see “The Changing of the Guard in Georgia’s Workforce”).

During 2005, the leisure and hospitality sector was one of the bright spots among Georgia’s employment sectors. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in Georgia’s leisure and hospitality industry increased from 357,200 in December 2004 to 370,000 in December 2005.

Tourism in general, including conventions and other visitors, is already an important economic cog in Georgia and the Southeast. Florida ranked second and Georgia eighth among states in traveler spending in 2003, according to the most recent data available from the Travel Industry Association of America (TIAA). That year, visitors spent $56.3 billion in Florida and $15.65 billion in Georgia. (California was no. 1 at $71.56 billion.)

Much of Georgia’s tourist trade comes from conventions and meetings in Atlanta. According to the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, Atlanta is the fourth-largest convention center in the United States after Las Vegas, Chicago, and Orlando. In 2004, more than 3 million conventioneers visited Atlanta.

Economic developers hope various new and expanded attractions will help lure more leisure travelers as well. In the same month the aquarium debuted, Atlanta’s High Museum of Art unveiled a $130 million expansion by renowned architect Renzo Piano that...
more than doubled its gallery space. Meanwhile, the
High's parent organization, the Woodruff Arts Center, is working to raise funds for a $300 million symphony hall. A
$10 million museum commemorating the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta will open in July at the Atlanta History Center, and
a new World of Coca-Cola Pavilion is scheduled to open next to the aquarium in 2007. Atlanta was also one of three
cities competing for the NASCAR Hall of Fame to add to its downtown complement of tourist venues, but NASCAR
recently awarded the hall to Charlotte, N.C.

Elsewhere in Georgia, the Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah opened a $24.5 million expansion in March; a folk
pottery museum is scheduled to open in the summer of 2006 in northeast Georgia; and an expansion of the Georgia
Children's Museum in Macon is planned to open in the fall.

A package deal

Those sorts of attractions are an extra drawing card for conventions and business travelers, but they also lure
so-called cultural and heritage tourists, a category of traveler that has generated increasing interest from economic
developers in Georgia and elsewhere in recent years. Georgia has traditionally not been a leading cultural tourism
destination because the state lacks the numerous prestigious arts and cultural institutions like those in New York,
Chicago, and San Francisco. In fact, none of the nation's 20 most visited art museums in 2005 are in the Southeast,
according to the New York-based Association of Art Museum Directors. Atlanta's High Museum ranked 44th nationally.

Still, while Georgia economic developers might be more accustomed to wooing factories than fine arts patrons, they
are paying more attention to cultural and artistic resources because the people who visit them tend to spend freely.
Cultural tourists spend 36 percent more money on average and take longer trips—5.2 nights versus 3.4 nights—than
other tourists, according to the TIAA and Smithsonian magazine's 2003 study, The Historic/Cultural Traveler. The
study also reports that 81 percent of U.S. adults—118.1 million people—who traveled in the preceding year were
considered historic/cultural travelers.

The Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, noted more for touting the city's major convention trade than for
promoting the arts, established a cultural and heritage marketing department in 1997. The department arranges art
and culture-themed travel packages in collaboration with museums and performing arts groups, said Jo Ann
Haden-Miller, the bureau's director of cultural and heritage marketing. The bureau has teamed with the High Museum
on 14 packages built around major exhibitions and has also worked with the Fernbank Museum of Natural History, the
Carter Center, and the National Black Arts Festival, among others.

Southeast of Atlanta on the Georgia coast, the historic city of Savannah's Convention and Visitors Bureau puts cultural
and heritage tourism squarely in the middle of its marketing plans. Special vacation packages include one focused on
the city's famous gardens, elaborate iron gates, and the Telfair Museum and another package built around the life of
Paula Deen, a well-known local restaurateur and host of her own television show on the Food Network.

Traveling to experience art, culture, and heritage is nothing new, as Haden-Miller points out. But only in the past
decade or so has the notion of cultural and heritage tourism taken on a distinct identity. That process was spurred in
part by a 1995 White House conference on the topic, she said. "People have been doing this as travelers for years. It
just never had been branded," Haden-Miller said.

Vivent les arts

The elements that attract cultural and heritage tourists—museums, galleries, historic sites, concerts, and performing
and folk arts—have traditionally been viewed by economic developers as amenities that are useful in attracting
employees to an area. Despite the growing popularity of cultural tourism as a marketing strategy, arts institutions still
don't excite traditional economic developers as much as an auto plant or microchip factory.

"Oh no," said Shelton Stanfill, chief executive officer of the Woodruff Arts Center. "They haven't come that far. I don't
want to kid myself."

Promoters of the arts and related tourism point to examples of economic revivals sparked by art and culture. In
Colquitt, a town of 2,000 in southwest Georgia, a locally produced play called Swamp Gravy has produced a boomlet.
First staged in 1992, Swamp Gravy has toured the country, has been presented at the Kennedy Center for the
Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and was part of the Cultural Olympiad Arts Festival held alongside the 1996
Olympics. A new version is produced annually.

The Southern Growth Policies Board, a public think tank in North Carolina, reports
on its Web site that the play's "impact has been dramatic: Swamp Gravy has sold
120,000 tickets since it started, and has been something of a mini-economic boon
to the town." The play's popularity has spurred the creation of an arts
organization that operates a historic bed and breakfast; a mini-mall where
vendors of arts, crafts, and antiques benefit from affordable rent; a Storytelling
Museum and annual Storytelling Festival; and the New Life Learning Center,
where residents and visitors can train in traditional crafts of Georgia.

Photo courtesy of the Woodruff Arts Center
Stanfill believes the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta has had its own sort of spin-off effects. He notes that before the arts center was built in midtown Atlanta in the 1960s, only one major building had been constructed in that part of the city in 40 years. The area has since boomed, adding more than 10 million square feet of office space, half of it class A and most of it built in the past 10 years. The arts center was not solely responsible, but it played a role, Stanfill figures.

**Hauling in the cash**

Stanfill notes that 40 percent of visitors to major exhibits at the High Museum come from out of town, whether on business or vacation, and thus spend money on accommodations, food, and other items.

Many of those out-of-towners are likely now visiting the Georgia Aquarium. As of March 1, just 98 days after opening, the aquarium had its millionth visitor, which puts the facility well on its way to eclipsing the 2 million visitors aquarium officials expected in the first year. And the aquarium has already well surpassed its goal of selling 80,000 season passes. As of January, 200,000 had been sold, so aquarium managers decided to cut off the sale of season passes for now.

While the aquarium is presumably sparking activity beyond its walls, the facility is still too new for any meaningful data to be available on its broader economic impact. But another fish tank, the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, which is not as large as the Georgia Aquarium, pumps $250 million a year into the California economy, according to a study conducted for the aquarium and released in December 2004.

Like the Georgia Aquarium, Monterey’s facility had a deep-pocketed benefactor, the late David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard. His gift allowed the aquarium to open debt-free, like its Georgia counterpart. That factor is critical because heavy debt has plagued several aquariums around the nation, including publicly funded facilities in Tampa, Denver, and Long Beach, Calif.

On a daily operating level, the Georgia Aquarium is designed to function with 40 percent fewer employees than other major aquariums, Marcus said. The hallways, for instance, are wide enough to accommodate small trucks to more efficiently move fish and other animals. And tables, chairs, and catering equipment can be stored in the walls, so staff can quickly set up and dismantle for special events.

While Marcus’ aquarium has made a huge splash, his former Home Depot partner and Atlanta Falcons owner, Arthur Blank, is leading the fund-raising campaign—the largest ever undertaken for an arts organization in the Southeast—for what Atlanta arts officials hope will be an iconic new symphony hall. Fundraisers still need more than $100 million, and they had hoped to receive $50 million from the state during the 2006 legislative session. But the funds were not included in Gov. Perdue’s budget.

Nonetheless, backers are still optimistic that the stunning venue by world-class architect Santiago Calatrava will be built and become the jewel of Georgia’s cultural offerings, luring people to hear great music and spend some money while they’re in town.

*This article was written by Charles Davidson, a staff writer for EconSouth.*