

Athens Tourism Strategic Plan

Executive Summary

Background

Athens-Clarke County, GA is known across the nation for being one of America's preeminent college towns. Anchored by the University of Georgia, Athens offers residents and visitors a thriving mix of food and beverage experiences, a legendary music scene, natural scenery, an array of independent small businesses, an appealing venue for meetings and events, and a robust arts community. Athens' abundance of assets exceeds those found in many similarly-sized college communities, and the city is consistently rated among the most appealing college towns in the U.S. by visitors and media alike. The state of Athens tourism is strong, and the local sector fortunate to be led by people with passion, vision, and intelligence. Indeed, what has already been accomplished in Athens is remarkable and a testament to the creativity and risk-taking of leaders both past and present.

But Athens also possesses some challenges as a destination. Overnight stays are heavily skewed towards major university events, including football weekends, graduation, and parents' weekends. Many meeting planners and regional travelers perceive Athens as being hard to get to, and only associate the destination with the university or don't know what else there is to see and do. The downtown neighborhood is a significant driver of economic activity for the city, but is also beset by a lack of a central gathering place, perceptions of constant infrastructure work, and panhandling. Many of Athens' assets lack physical and/or thematic connectivity. While football games and other major UGA events fill lodging, there are still other untapped opportunities for collaboration between the tourism sector and the university.

And those are just the local challenges. Even as it continues its recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector nationally and globally faces great uncertainty due to inflation, staffing shortages, demographic trends, supply chain challenges, changes in business travel behavior and the rise of remote work, and possible recession. That uncertainty is just one reason why the Athens Convention and Visitors Bureau embarked upon a strategic planning process to provide a roadmap for Athens' tourism for the next few years.

Plan Goals

This roadmap will guide the investment of human and financial resources and improve Athens' positioning in a highly competitive marketplace. The plan is intended to enhance both the destination AND the community—a great place to live is usually a great place to visit, and vice versa.

That raises an important point of emphasis with this plan. It is not intended to be a plan the CVB can achieve by itself. There are components that are solely the responsibility of the CVB and its board, but many of the strategies and tactics outlined here are dependent on the CVB's partners in the private sector, non-profit organizations, local government, and the University of Georgia. Action items within the strategic plan are segmented into those that the CVB can achieve by itself ("activate"); those where the CVB must rely upon working closely with others ("collaborate"); and those where the outcomes are dependent upon other entities ("advocate"). This plan is intended to be a community road map not just for Athens tourism, but also for enhanced economic development and resident quality of life.

The Athens tourism strategic plan was informed by several research initiatives during late 2021 and 2022, including:

- Interviews with meeting and event planners from across Georgia and nearby states
- Surveys of regional leisure travelers within easy driving distance of Athens
- Surveys of Athens-Clarke County residents
- Interviews and focus groups with Athens-Clarke County tourism stakeholders and partners

Guiding Principles

To ensure the effectiveness of the final plan and to maximize the return on investment of both the CVB and the community, several guiding principles were adhered to during the development of the plan. These principles act as the guardrails for the strategies and action items. ***These include building from the strengths of Athens as a destination and community and being authentic; maintaining and celebrating Athens' unique character as one of the motivators of visitation; recognizing that the destination and the community are one and the same; encouraging careful consideration of investment options; and being able to measure the results of the plan.***

Success for Athens tourism as a result of this strategic plan will be about more than just heads in beds, although that is important because overnight visitors generate greater economic impact for the local economy, usually have higher visit satisfaction than daytrippers, and typically generate more positive word of mouth. ***Success really means that Athens visitors are happier and come back more often, and their spending supports Athens' beloved small businesses, musicians, artists, and other entrepreneurs.***

Success also means that Athens is celebrated by more people for its creative community. As one stakeholder put it, “Creativity permeates everything here.” Athens is proud of its contributions in many different categories, and tourism is one of the keys to establishing greater financial support for those artisans. And while football and other popular UGA events will continue to bring thousands of visitors every year, more travelers visiting Athens without a university event to attend will also be a sign of success.

Four Must-Dos to Grow the Visitor Economy

This strategic plan is built around four strategic imperatives. These pillars are the “must-dos” for Athens—the CVB, its partners, and the community--to enhance and grow its visitor economy during the period of the plan, and beyond. Each imperative has strategies and action items associated with them, and clear delineation of responsibilities. These strategies and action items are based upon a realistic portfolio of resources, both human and financial. Athens tourism doesn’t lack for ideas. What it doesn’t have is unlimited money and time, and so what the community needs is focus. This plan is intended to provide that focus.

1. Enhance the Athens visitor experience.

Create a vibrant year-round destination that builds upon community strengths, attracts new audiences, and generates new overnight visitors.

- ✓ Evolve the Athens Music Walk of Fame with digital technology.
- ✓ Develop and promote Georgia Music Hall of Fame collections.
- ✓ Support the development of a central outdoor gathering/performing space.
- ✓ Advocate for a safe, clean, and more walkable downtown.
- ✓ Create a hospitality alliance to advocate and support tourism-related issues.

2. Create greater connectivity among and to destination assets.

Build seamless experiences for Athens visitors by enabling ease of access and supporting the development of assets connecting them to attractions and neighborhoods.

- ✓ Install wayfinding system as both visitor resource and in-destination awareness & marketing medium.
- ✓ Continue to develop and connect greenways, enhancing them with public art and interpretive signage.
- ✓ Continue to develop Oconee River recreational assets.
- ✓ Facilitate river access from downtown and give visitors permission to experience the river.
- ✓ Continue efforts to attract a regional or national passenger rail to Athens.

- ✓ Once commercial air service is established, cultivate awareness of Athens in key fly markets and state/national meetings targets.
- ✓ Facilitate the perception of the ease of getting to Athens in sales and marketing content.
- ✓ Encourage visitor engagement with non-downtown neighborhoods and businesses by regularly sharing their stories on CVB marketing platforms.
- ✓ Demonstrate the proximity of downtown Athens hotels to the Classic Center as a means of overcoming meeting planner resistance to limited hotel adjacency.
- ✓ Provide trolleys or other similar vehicles as a means of connecting area hotels to the Classic Center and creating a secondary revenue stream.

3. Leverage the University of Georgia as an everyday tourism asset.

Build a marriage between UGA and tourism that transcends other components of the “town and gown” relationship and mutually benefits both sectors.

- ✓ Form a UGA and tourism working group to maximize opportunities.
- ✓ Create everyday attractions/destination experiences leveraged from UGA assets
- ✓ Strengthen the alignment of CVB sales efforts with opportunities related to broader university events and programming.
- ✓ Seek out more opportunities to leverage tourism as the first date of the student/parent/alumni relationship.
- ✓ Build a university speakers bureau for use of meeting and conference planners
- ✓ Target alumni as a potentially rich source of meetings and events.
- ✓ Identify ways of engaging with parents and alumni for leisure outside of big event weekends.

4. Feed the Athens brand.

Increase awareness of Athens as a world-class destination that also happens to be a college town.

- ✓ Unleash the power of the destination’s makers and creators (including food and beverage creators) by making them the heart of the brand
- ✓ Use public relations, social media, and video as primary storytelling vehicles to communicate the depth and breadth of Athens as a destination
- ✓ Continue to dedicate resources to the Athens Beer Trail
- ✓ Expand outreach to more people of color by featuring them in all CVB marketing platforms and storytelling
- ✓ Invest more in destination marketing
- ✓ Prioritize events, venues, and other programs that are most likely to lead to new overnight stays
- ✓ Take ownership of a positioning that leverages Athens’ reputation for and legacy of live music