

Heart of Cherokee

Heritage Tourism Actions Will Pump New Vitality into the EBCI's Economy



For decades, tourism has been the economic lifeblood of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians as families within a short driving distance of Cherokee, NC, came to see the Cherokee Indians. In recent years, however, fewer families have visited the Qualla Boundary and most visitors have come for gaming entertainment. Heart of Cherokee, a planning effort organized by Cherokee Preservation Foundation that has involved many members of the local community, was convened to help the tribe get tourism growth back on track. The Eastern Band wants both heritage tourists and gaming aficionados coming to the Qualla Boundary.

Today many Americans and international visitors are keenly interested in heritage tourism, travel that is motivated by a desire to experience the authentic natural, historical and cultural resources of a community or region. Studies have shown that cultural heritage travelers stay longer and spend more money than other kinds of travelers. With its cultural heritage, the EBCI has much to offer such visitors, and Heart of Cherokee's goals involve making the tribe's cultural offerings for visitors even richer so more of them will come for an extended stay, tell their friends about the Qualla Boundary, and come back to visit again.

A strong cultural heritage program improves the quality of life for residents. It diversifies the local economy and preserves the community's unique character. To serve the needs of the community and visitors, the Heart of Cherokee Committee collaborated over a six month period to focus on quality and authenticity, determine how to make programs and sites come alive for visitors, and protect community resources. Specifically, the Committee's goals were to develop a Cherokee brand—a unique experience for visitors based on traditional Cherokee values and culture—and to create a plan for how the activities of the major cultural attractions on the Qualla Boundary could be better coordinated.

The Cherokee Visitor Experience

The Heart of Cherokee initiative is based on a vision for a visitor experience in which the Oconaluftee River will be visible from decks on restaurants and shops, and from green spaces and sidewalks. Visitors strolling down the river will encounter artisans and artists, Cherokee foods, and colorful banners.

In the tourist district, stores will display the best of Cherokee arts and crafts, both contemporary and traditional, and visitors will hear the Cherokee language and distinctive sounds of Cherokee and other Native American music all around them. The Museum, the Village, the Drama and Qualla Arts & Crafts will present the history and culture in new ways that engage and inform,



The Oconaluftee River

as well as entertain. Unique and tasteful lighting, signage, murals and sculpture will drive home the point that visitors have been magically transported into another country, one in which Cherokee art, culture and love of nature have been infused into every aspect of daily life. Visitors will feel embraced by a unique culture that is ancient, modern, welcoming and proud.

Six Action Plans

The Committee determined that action plans were required in six areas in order to develop the foundation for such a visitor experience. Each of the plans is intended to support traditional Cherokee values and culture and create a visible difference in the next one to two years. All the plans are achievable with the resources that are controlled by individuals and institutions in the community. Cherokee Preservation Foundation will provide significant financial support for implementation of the plans.

The Heart of Cherokee Committee

The Heart of Cherokee Committee included representatives from the EBCI Executive Branch and Tribal Council, Cherokee cultural organizations, hoteliers and merchants, Harrah's, community groups, banks, artists and regional organizations. The Committee worked closely with the EBCI Travel and Promotion department and the Goss Agency, the ad agency that is helping Travel and Promotion market the Cherokee visitor experience.



Committee members were Fred Alexander, Becky Anderson, Davey Arch, Brian Burgess, Doug Cole, Priscilla Cooper, Joyce Dugan, Mickey Duvall, Mary Jane Ferguson, Butch Goings, Lynne Harlan, T.J. Holland, Susan Jenkins, Marie Junaluska, Bud Lambert, George Lambert, Jason Lambert, Sheila Lambert, Janene Lancaster, Vicki Ledford, Carmaleta Monteith, Paxton Myers, Paula Nelson, Brenda Oocumma, Joel Queen, and Bo Taylor.



1 Develop and train a cadre of distinctively dressed Cherokee ambassadors who will meet the visiting public on a regular basis and provide special Cherokee greetings and valuable information. The ambassador corps will offer the public a consistent voice of Cherokee hospitality in a variety of locations and venues and will help market Cherokee.

2 Protect and enhance the Oconaluftee River. The plan includes cleaning up the river and removing unsightly elements, expanding the greenway along the river and creating interpretive signage to help visitors understand the river's importance to the tribe.

3 Create a Cherokee business alliance to unite and support the interests of the business community, enhance collaboration between the business community and the Tribal Government, and create a pool of resources that will aid the community's economic development. A new Cherokee Chamber of Commerce has been formed as a result of this plan.

4 Create banners and signs for the Cherokee Cultural District to produce a distinctive and unique look for the area that encompasses the EBCI Fairgrounds, Cherokee Museum, Qualla Arts & Crafts, Cherokee Historical Association, the EBCI Welcome Center, the Mountainside Theatre, Oconaluftee Village, Nundayeli Trail and connecting roadways.

5 Prepare an updated map of Cherokee and the surrounding area to orient tourists to the major institutions and cultural attractions of Cherokee.

6 Take actions that will enable the EBCI Fairgrounds to achieve the event staffing needed to efficiently produce multiple, high-quality events.

Cherokee Preservation Foundation is pleased to note that a number of the action plans are already being implemented, and that some of the results will already be visible by the beginning of the 2006 tourism season. It is gratifying to see that the major cultural entities and entrepreneurs are collaborating to provide more education and entertainment options to visitors.

Cherokee Preservation Foundation was established in 2000 as part of the Second Amendment to the Tribal-State Compact between the EBCI and the State of North Carolina. It is an independent nonprofit foundation funded by the EBCI from the tribe's gaming revenues. Since the Foundation's inception, it has made 265 grants totaling more than \$17.8 million. It is a grantmaker, a convener, a partnership broker and a community builder.