

The Value of Your DMO Partner

Indiana's Dearborn County Visitors Bureau was essential to help groups overcome weather challenges this past spring.

By Sally McWilliams

Tremendous rains and resulting Ohio River flooding created challenges for everyone involved with group tours scheduled to visit Dearborn County in Southeast Indiana during late April and early May.

The week between April 27 and May 4, the Dearborn County Visitors Bureau had three group tours on the calendar—a day trip from Cincinnati, an overnight FAM tour from northern Ohio, and an overnight trip from the tornado ravaged Birmingham, Alabama area. We were very concerned about the following:

- maintaining positive visitor experience and safety despite inclement weather.
- maintaining good relationships with tour operators/group leaders and helping deliver the itineraries they had sold.
- ensuring our local partner properties benefited economically from the tours as planned without increasing property liability.

APRIL 27—Joy Tours & Travels Day Trip

The week prior to this trip, Southeast Indiana had experienced heavy and frequent rainfall, but all roads and attractions were open, and the tour operator had confirmed the group was coming. As the forecasts continued to predict rain, the Dearborn County Visitors Bureau arranged for a step-on guide as a precaution and courtesy (at no cost to the group) to replace a walking tour of Lawrenceburg's historic downtown and Ohio River levee.

The night before and early morning of the group visit, downpours changed the game plan. After checking with the curator of Veraestau, the historic home in Aurora that was the intended focus

of the trip, we made the call to cancel the afternoon site visit. The property's roadway was in jeopardy and the surrounding ground was impassable. I called the tour operator to let her know the situation. She had just begun passenger pick-up stops, but decided to continue on and enjoy what they could of the area.

When the group arrived at the Visitors Center, I informed the operator of the step-on guide to make their "walking tour" more comfortable for all. In addition to basic history and architecture information, the guide (who was Veraestau's curator) incorporated stories of past floods into his narrative. Knowing the group was disappointed not to visit Veraestau that day, he offered them the opportunity to reschedule a complimentary site visit. They were delighted.

The group was able to visit the levee briefly, but threatening skies prevented the planned "strolling along the levee" and group photo opportunities. After a greenhouse tour and floral demonstration at McCabe's Greenhouse and Floral, the next stop was lunch.

Whisky's Family Restaurant understood our itinerary change, and generously allowed the group to linger and enjoy a more leisurely lunch.

The ten-minute drive to the historic river town of Aurora was one flooded view after another. The Ohio River Scenic Byway (State Road 56) was closed at the east edge of town. The group stopped at the Aurora City Hall to see the historic jail and some ventured out to view a few Windows of Aurora murals during a break in the weather. All were treated to a surprise visit by the Mayor of Aurora, Donnie Hastings, stopping by to thank them for visiting and encouraging them to return during prettier weather. When he learned they would return for a visit to Veraestau, he told them he would join them that day to celebrate. He made quite an impression.

In spite of cancellation and inconve-

nience during the dismal weather, the group remained enthusiastic and enjoyed their day in Dearborn County.

But would the weather conditions improve enough in a week's time to allow a motorcoach to travel along Veraestau Lane for the two groups visiting May 4?

MAY 3-4 Lakefront Lines/Hollywood Casino FAM Trip

Hollywood Casino and Cleveland's Lakefront Lines hosted a FAM tour of Northern Kentucky and Southeast Indiana during May 3 and 4. The first planned stop in the region was to be a BB Riverboat lunch cruise along the Ohio River. Susan Bonner, group sales manager at Hollywood Casino, determined on April 26 (one week prior to arrival) that she needed a Plan B for the river cruise. The Ohio River was rising steadily. By end of day, Hofbrauhaus in Newport, Kentucky had stepped up and was willing to provide lunch for the group.

After Dearborn County Visitor Center's group tour experience the previous week, they were keeping tabs on the lane leading to Veraestau and whether or not it could handle the heavy motorcoach taking the FAM Tour to local attractions. Although river water levels had fallen and rain slowed, the National Weather Service advised that "ground conditions across the region are saturated due to the recent rainfall." I called Susan at Hollywood to request the use of their shuttle buses and drivers for the local tour on May 4 "just in case." Hollywood scheduled their drivers and provided shuttles for the county tour.

MAY 4 TRAVELLIN OWLS OVERNIGHT TRIP

The Travellin Owls group from Mt. Olive, Alabama, had just experienced

the Birmingham area tornadoes and were traveling north to visit Kentucky's Shaker Village and the Creation Museum and take a Twilight Tour of Aurora, Indiana's historic mansions, Hillforest and Veraestau. The last thing we wanted was for them to have an unpleasant weather-related experience in Dearborn County. Their scheduled Twilight Tour was the culmination of their trip—a catered dinner and tour followed by a tour and dessert buffet—the evening meal and entertainment.

A few days before the scheduled trip, Hillforest Victorian House Museum agreed to serve the Twilight Tour dessert buffet if needed (in addition to the dinner) if Veraestau's ground conditions did not improve. But this group couldn't "come back another day" and we wanted them to have the full experience. After using the Hollywood shuttles during the FAM Tour, we knew we needed to acquire appropriated transportation to Veraestau for the Alabama group.

After a dozen or more calls to transportation providers, Debbie Smith, Visitors Center Director, contracted three large vans from Executive Transportation in Northern Kentucky. They arrived at Hillforest Mansion and shuttled the passengers to and from Veraestau for the last leg of the tour. The passengers had a wonderful experience, and the motorcoach driver and the group leader were both relieved to have avoided any potential transportation difficulties.

Everyone involved helped make these three trips successful with their flexibility and positive attitude. The Visitors Bureau extended itself financially and with manpower. Most events did not have to be canceled and safety was never overlooked. **fi**

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