

Rural tourism and the Internet

Rural tourism - The business of providing tours and services for tourists, of the country as distinguished from the city.

Content Areas

Information available on the Internet about rural tourism includes two areas:

- Content for professionals; i.e. information about grants, statistical analysis of people's impressions, traveler's impressions, ideas about rural tourism
- Marketing information pointed towards potential or reoccurring travelers – information about where to stay, what to do, and in rare occasions, opportunities to book rooms or secure trips online

Characteristics of geographic archetypes

In visiting official area websites, an observer could divide site types into three geographic sections that would have local information:

- State – an official state website; includes division of state into tourist regions, state-related government information, and a state theme for tourism
- Regional – a grouped collective of areas/counties, working together to form some symbol or brand for a region
- Local – a city or town site, highlighting sights of interest and tourist potentials within this local area

There are federal and larger geographical sites available, but these are beyond the focus of this investigation.

State websites

State websites are the official sites for a state; for example, Arkansas.com and Ohiotourism.com are two official state websites. State sites tend to exhibit the following characteristics:

Site Quality	High; highest of the three types usually
Topics covered:	
Attractions	Yes, to a medium degree
Shopping	Yes, to a medium degree
Packages	Yes, to a high degree
Dining	Yes, to a medium degree
Lodging	Yes, to a medium degree
Functionality	High; usually professionally designed and developed
Connection to rural areas	Low; not unless there is a specific reason, or the percentage of rural areas is high (above 40%)
Ease of use	High; usually professionally designed and developed
Overall Rating	High; these sites are usually complete, easy to use and functional. Repeat visits are encouraged, and nothing on these sites would usually turn an average visitor away.

Regional Websites

Regional websites are the official sites for a region; a region would normally signify an area across county borders. Examples include VistitNewEngland.com, www.visitnwp.com and GoNorthWest.com are examples. Regional sites tend to exhibit the following characteristics:

Site Quality	Low to medium; mid-range of the three types usually
Topics covered:	
Attractions	Yes, to a medium degree
Shopping	Yes, to a medium degree
Packages	Yes, to a high degree
Dining	Yes, to a medium degree
Lodging	Yes, to a medium degree
Functionality	High to medium; usually professionally designed and developed
Connection to rural areas	Medium to high; usually the percentage of rural areas covered by the region is high (above 40%), so the focus generally consists on these rural areas as a 'getaway'
Ease of use	High; usually professionally designed and developed
Overall Rating	High; these sites are usually complete, easy to use and functional. Repeat visits are encouraged, and nothing on these sites would usually turn an average visitor away.

Local websites

Local websites are the official sites for a local region; here defined as a city, or area small enough to be a single cohesive unit. Local sites can be divided between rural and metropolitan, but are still similar in scope. Lasvegas.com, www.cityofseattle.net, and NYCVisit.com are all examples. Local sites tend to exhibit the following characteristics:

Site Quality	Low; lowest of the three types usually
Topics covered:	
Attractions	Yes, to a high degree, each type of local site will try to focus on attractions that are popular and/or unique to the area
Shopping	Yes, to a high degree, direct links to retailer's sites or addresses for them
Packages	Yes, to a high degree, these are usually the main focus of these sites to attract visitors, especially for rural or small areas, not as much for metropolitan areas, but still a focus
Dining	Yes, to a high degree, restaurants are usually prosperous even in rural areas, and usually are a large part of the tourism push, same for large metropolitan cities
Lodging	Yes, to a medium degree, lodging is usually deficient in rural areas, and in larger areas, lodging is usually an afterthought or acquired through a hotel chain's official site
Functionality	Low to medium; sometimes professionally designed and

	developed
Connection to rural areas	Low to medium to high; not unless there is a specific reason, or the site is focused on a rural area
Ease of use	Low to medium; sometimes professionally designed and developed
Overall Rating	Low to medium; there sites are sometimes complete, easy to use and functional. Sometimes there are inconsistencies, broken links, or a strong enough lack of functionality to turn a visitor away

Actions & Reactions – Searching for rural tourism

In a preliminary analysis of web sites on the internet related to rural tourism, there was a relatively small amount of sites that were directed towards a potential traveler, allowing this traveler to learn about a region and possibly complete the learning experience with the following actions:

1. requesting more information
2. interactively booking a trip online

These would seem to the casual observer relatively important areas of content to include. Even if the main focus of the site is to allow professionals access to information, it would be advantageous to include information (such as a section of the site 'for travelers'. For example) that would allow travelers to experience something about the region.

In a transversal of the Internet looking for ways to learn or participate in rural tourism, the types of sites found include three general classifications:

1. Official State sites and Official regional sites: Arkansas.com, and for example, Allegheny Mountain's official web site.
2. General Travel sites: Expedia.com, for example.
3. Travel/Tourism/Regional Area informational sites: Travel and Tourism Research Association, for example

As an observer looking for information about visiting an area, the following table shows the relative helpfulness of sites in each area, following a review of approximately 100 sites, divided evenly among the three types:

Site type	Amount of relative information to actual visits	Accessibility to actual reservations
1 (Official)	70-80%	10-20%
2 (General)	30-40%	90-100%
3 (Informational)	60-70%	10-20%

Case Study: Arkansas.com and ExperiencePA.com

Arkansas.com was an excellent example of what to do when providing information to the traveler. To put Arkansas situation I perspective, 57.9 percent of Arkansas was classified as rural, according to the 'non-metropolitan' description in the 1990 Census, making access to potential rural tourism money an important resource for Arkansas.

As a casual observer of the website, I could quickly get access to information about all areas of Arkansas, and add a visit to anywhere in Arkansas to my trip planner, and online tool for creating my own personal trip. The same page also allows access to phone numbers, information about what payment forms the traveler could use, and any other information I could use to book by phone if necessary. This information is standard across all the places in Arkansas.com, whether rural or urban.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Arkansas.com website. The browser's address bar shows the URL: http://arkansas.com/attractions/attr_detail/dj24192/r/Timberlands/city/Ashdown. The website header includes the Arkansas logo and navigation links for HOME, FIND A MAP, and FREE VACATION KIT. A left-hand navigation menu lists various categories such as State Parks, Outdoors & Sports, History & Heritage, Arts & Entertainment, Attractions, Lodging & Dining, Calendar of Events, Must See in Arkansas, Plan a Trip, Relocation & Retirement, E-Cards, Screen Savers & Wallpapers, Kids Stuff, and Group Travel, Reunions & Conventions. The main content area is titled "Timberlands Region: Ashdown" and features a map of Arkansas with a red dot indicating the location of Ashdown. Below the map, the details for "PLDC Cabin in the Woods" are listed, including the address (174 Little River 790, Ashdown, AR 71822), contact information (pureldc@arkansas.net, http://www.bbonline.com/ar/cabinwoods/index.html), and accepted credit cards (American Express, MasterCard, Visa). A red arrow points to the "ADD TO TRIP PLANNER" button, which is highlighted in red. Below this button is another button labeled "Add to Trip Planner".

ExperiencePA.com also allows for a similar type of travel planner. ExperiencePA.com also has another unique attribute: it has created a network of niche sites about the PA living and traveling experience, called the ExperiencePA network. Reference the table to the left for a sample of available sites.

Although the ExperiencePA network does a fine job of covering many interests and applicable activities in PA, there is no site focusing on rural tourism; no ruralpa.com (that domain name lies dormant, although ruralpa.org is an existing site, dealing with resources for rural Pennsylvania resources such as grants, other funding, etc.).

Conclusion

Both Arkansas.com and ExperiencePA.com have this same inadequacy: they have access to information and booking services online, but no centralized way to answer these questions:

- I would like a rural vacation in your state, how can I create this trip online?
- Where can I see a list or database of rural places to visit and activities to participate in?

There is a high potential financial return for states like Arkansas and Pennsylvania; allowing for direct access to hotels, camping, and tours online can increase the conversion of potential to actual for states to utilize their natural and rural resources.

Sections of the ExperiencePA network (text following from ExperiencePA.com)

Antiquing in PA

Know where to go for the best antiquing in Pennsylvania, from large fairs to small town shops.

Factory Tours in PA

Explore the havens of sweets, amber brews and crispy snacks. Or take a virtual tour of giants Harley-Davidson and Martin Guitar.

Scenic Route 6

Relive the days when getting there was half the fun as you travel across Pennsylvania's Scenic Route 6.

FallinPA.com

Watch Fall unfold in Pennsylvania and see our amazing Fall web cams.

WinterinPA.com

When the temperature dips and snow starts to fall, Pennsylvania doesn't miss a beat. Find a cure for cabin fever at WinterInPA.com.

PaFairways.com

Experience over 500 beautiful courses and great golf-resorts intertwined with Pennsylvania's awe-inspiring landscapes.

ExtremePA.com

Action sports enthusiasts love Pennsylvania – visit ExtremePA to find out why!

PAHuntandFish.com

Wild game and fish can be found in abundance throughout Pennsylvania. Visit PAHuntandFish.com to find the best spots for your sporting getaway.

PAHeritageRegions.com

Follow the Path of Progress as you visit these Historic regions that helped to build a Commonwealth — and a Nation.

PARailways.com

Climb on board for a journey along Pennsylvania's Historic Railways -- you won't believe what you'll discover.

Case Study: <http://allegheny-vacation.com>

The focus of our study is the Northwestern PA/Southwestern NY area, and the epicenter of rural tourism in that area is the Allegheny National Forest. The forest, which encompasses 513,257 acres, is within easy driving distance of several metropolitan areas in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Ontario, Canada, giving it an extremely high potential as a Mecca for rural tourism.

With that in mind, a vacation bureau serving that area needs to be responsible in allowing total regional awareness and acceptance on its site; Allegheny National Forest is big, and spans many counties and localities. However, as a casual observer of Allegheny-vacation.com, I would assume that Allegheny National Forest exists only in McKean County. One could not even easily find a link to the official Allegheny National Forest home page (www.fs.fed.us/r9/allegheny/). As a rural tourist, I should be able to see a map showing the vastness and all the opportunities for the Allegheny National Forest.

Find Yourself in the Forest...

Email 1-800-473-9370 PACKAGES EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS VISITOR SERVICES

Allegheny National Forest VACATION BUREAU

What to Do
Where to Stay
Where to Eat
Shopping
Plan Your Visit
Business Directory
Press
Calendar of Events
Group Tours
Contact Us
Scenic Route 6
Attractions
Cities & Towns
Group Tour Guide
HOME

All Aboard! Train Excursion

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Package Includes: Journey to the Famous Kinzua Viaduct aboard the Knox & Kane Excursion Train!

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PA PENNSYLVANIA

McKean County

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Beyond this point, Allegheny National Forest Bureau's website is a good design; the pages look excellent, the content is easy to find and to navigate, and the design is inviting. The information and functionality I expected was there and easy to find; the pages were fast (relative to their location, currently this site must be in production and residing on goerie.com's server, I'm expecting a move to permanent hosting) and easy to navigate.

Obviously allegheny-vacation.com is professionally designed; our next subject is functionality. Here we observe:

- Features like Send a Postcard are interesting and easy to use; this kind of interactivity and functionality are key
- 'Zooming' in on photos is another welcome addition; easy to use and helpful to the visitor
- The text is short and sweet, and photos are high quality; and great accompaniment to the design layout

One deficiency I did find includes the absence of the possibility for creation of a personal travel package. I could not select a group of destinations and save them to my personal section of the site, for further review. This is an important feature when promoting rural tourism; most assets are geographically disperse, and not easily recognizable by the first-time traveler.

Another addition to functionality may include a 'send to a friend' feature, allowing a visitor to send an email with a link to any page on the website to a friend. This is a common feature on many general websites, and would be a worthwhile addition here.

Allegheny Vacation Bureau should also work to connect the chain from federal – state – region – local websites to help offer the traveler a full picture of the area. Although other sites may not be as cohesive and usable as allegheny-vacation.com, a 'Links to the Area', or similarly named page, with links to appropriate sites would be helpful.

Overall, allegheny-vacation.com is one of the best regional sites observed. Must suffer greatly in one area or another in terms of look and feel, usability, or some other major content area. Not only does allegheny-vacation.com have no glaring omissions, it covers the bases well.

Total Investigative Conclusions

Judging by the three geographical types, a focus on connecting state sites with rural resources would bring the quickest return with the short effort – many regional and local sites that are focused on rural areas are in bad shape; pushing official state sites to supplement their coverage with the information necessary to attract people to rural areas would require less effort than the re-engineering and marketing of rural sites, especially given the typical rural areas lack of funding for this type of endeavor. Viewing the coverage of rural areas on typical state sites would lead one to believe that representatives from regional areas have not pushed their state counterparts to work on completing their state's representation.

Observing from the position of a potential rural tourist, it takes a more than a nominal amount of effort to complete the task of securing a rural tourism trip. This would include; deciding on a region to visit, collecting information on that region, and booking a hotel room and entrance to some attractions, or a package.

Clearly, almost every tourism association has a web presence; however, there is not a coherent pathway to information and action on the subject of rural tourism in the United States. There is a gap to be filled, along with an opportunity for a leader to guide this growing revenue opportunity.

Applying this to rural tourism in Northwestern Pennsylvania, these facts became apparent:

- Allegheny Vacation Bureau has a web presence which represents the Northwestern PA region to an adequate degree; with some additions, <http://allegheny-vacation.com> will be close to the top of the list for regional sites in terms of ease of use and quality.
- Linking state, regional, and local sites (hopefully starting at the federal level) will help potential tourists to find a clear path around rural tourism in Northwestern PA. This is a must to keep potential tourists from frustration.
- Rural tourism has a large potential that is not being accurately represented on the Internet.

Works reviewed

Promoting Tourism in Rural America - <http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/tourism.html>

Rural Business Cooperative Services - <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/>

Rural Information Center - <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/>

National Laboratory for Tourism and eCommerce - <http://www.tourism.uiuc.edu/>

Travel and Tourism Research Association - <http://www.ttra.com/>

Smith Travel Research - <http://www.str-online.com/>

Arkansas.com - <http://arkansas.com/>

Definitions for Rural Profile of Arkansas -
<http://www.uark.edu/depts/hesweb/hdfsrs/definitions.html>

ExperiencePA.com - <http://www.experiencepa.com>

Allegheny Mountains - <http://www.amcvb.com/>

Allegheny Vacation Bureau - <http://www.allegheny-vacation.com/>

List of links to State Tourism Websites

Alabama - Bureau of Tourism and Travel

<http://www.touralabama.org/>

Alaska - Division of Tourism

<http://www.travelalaska.com/>

Arizona - Office of Tourism

<http://www.arizonaguide.com/>

Arkansas - Department of Parks and Tourism

<http://www.arkansas.com/>

California - Division of Tourism

<http://gocalif.ca.gov/>

Colorado - Travel and Tourism Authority

<http://www.colorado.com/>

Connecticut - Connecticut Tourism

<http://www.state.ct.us/tourism/>

Delaware - Office of Tourism

<http://www.visitdelaware.net>

Florida - Visit Florida, Inc.

<http://www.flausa.com/index.html>

Georgia - Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism

<http://www.georgia.org/tourism/index.html>

Hawaii - Visitors and Convention Bureau

<http://www.visit.hawaii.org>

Idaho - Division of Tourism Development

<http://www.visitid.org>

Illinois - Bureau of Tourism

<http://www.enjoyillinois.com>

Indiana - Department of Tourism

<http://www.state.in.us/tourism/>

Iowa - Division of Tourism

<http://www.state.ia.us/tourism/index.html>

Kansas - Department of Commerce and Housing

<http://www.kansascommerce.com/0400travel.html>

Kentucky - Department of Travel

<http://www.state.ky.us/tour/tour.htm>

Louisiana - Office of Tourism

<http://www.crt.state.la.us/crt/tourism.htm>

Maine - Office of Tourism

<http://www.visitmaine.com>

Maryland - Office of Tourism Development

<http://www.mdifun.org>

Massachusetts - Office of Travel and Tourism

<http://www.mass-vacation.com>

Michigan - Travel Michigan

<http://www.michigan.org/index.html>

Minnesota - Office of Tourism

<http://www.exploreminnesota.com>

Mississippi - Division of Tourist Development

<http://www.state.ms.us/its/msportal.nsf/WebForm/Tourism?OpenDocument>

Missouri - Division of Tourism

<http://www.missouritourism.org>

Montana - Travel Montana
<http://www.travel.state.mt.us>

Nebraska - Division of Tourism
<http://www.visitnebraska.org>

Nevada - Commission on Tourism
<http://www.travelnevada.com>

New Hampshire - Office of Travel and Tourism Development
<http://www.visitnh.gov>

New Jersey - Travel and Tourism
<http://www.state.nj.us/travel/index4.html>

New Mexico - Department of Tourism
<http://www.newmexico.org>

New York - Travel and Tourism
<http://iloveny.state.ny.us>

North Carolina - Travel and Tourism
<http://www.commerce.state.nc.us/tourism>

North Dakota - Tourism
<http://www.ndtourism.com>

Ohio - Division of Travel and Tourism
<http://www.ohiotourism.com>

Oklahoma - Tourism and Recreation Department
<http://www.travelok.com>

Oregon - Tourist Commission
<http://www.traveloregon.com>

Pennsylvania - Travel and Tourism
<http://www.experiencepa.com>

Rhode Island - Tourism Division
<http://www.visitrhodeisland.com>

South Carolina - Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism
<http://www.travelsc.com>

South Dakota - Department of Tourism
<http://www.state.sd.us/tourism>

Tennessee - Department of Tourist Development
<http://www.state.tn.us/tourdev>

Texas - Tourism Division
<http://www.traveltex.com>

Utah - Travel Council
<http://www.utah.com/home.htm>

Vermont - Department of Tourism and Marketing
<http://www.travel-vermont.com>

Virginia - Division of Tourism
<http://www.virginia.org>

Washington - Tourism Division
<http://www.tourism.wa.gov>

West Virginia - Division of Tourism
<http://www.state.wv.us/tourism>

Wisconsin - Department of Tourism
<http://www.travelwisconsin.com>

Wyoming - Division of Tourism
<http://www.state.wy.us/state/tourism/tourism.html>

District of Columbia - Convention and Visitors Association
<http://www.washington.org>

List of Selected Regional Sites

<http://NorthShoreLodging.com> - Features guide to lodging and attractions on the North Shore of Lake Superior from Duluth, Minnesota to Thunder Bay, Ontario. Mailing list, search.

<http://www.adironacks.org> - Area guide offers lodging, snowmobiling, hiking maps, bikeways, campgrounds, events, links and information.

<http://westrivertour.com/westriver/> - North Dakota area recreation information center.

<http://www.txcoastalbend.org/> - The Texas Coastal Bend Regional Tourism Council provides visitor and vacation information on the communities of the South Texas Coastal Bend.

<http://www.gonorthwest.com/> - Explore travel destinations in British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington. Discover cities, accommodations, activities, and attractions in the Pacific Northwest region of America.

<http://www.mountain-memories.com> - Tourist information provided for the Pacific northwest includes links to lodging, shopping, dining, activities, real estate and local Chambers of Commerce.

<http://www.inlandnorthwestliving.com/> - Provides links to communities, events, schools, weather and Real Estate for parts of the Pacific Northwest Region. Local calendar and maps available.

<http://dogwander.com/> - Interactive maps of motels, restaurants, fast food, and points of interest for Washington and North Idaho.

<http://www.winesnw.com/> - A guide to the wine country of the Pacific Northwest. Features maps, tours, and nearby lodging/dining. Also includes events, wine reviews, and wine buying information.

<http://ShakeOfftheCity.com> - lodging search and reviews, things to do, and more for getaway destinations within a few hours of New York City.

<http://www.visitnwpa.com/> - Adventures in Northwest Pennsylvania regional website.

<http://www.seawaytrail.com/> - The New York State Seaway Trail is a 454 mile scenic route paralleling Lake Erie, the Niagara River, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

<http://www.pagreatoutdoors.com> - Tourism informational website that includes Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Elk, Forest, Jefferson Counties.

List of Selected Local Sites

<http://PittsburghLIVE.com> - Pittsburgh's large Web site featuring 100% local news, sports, classifieds, entertainment listings and much more.

<http://LasVegas.com> – Official Las Vegas Nevada website, tourist information, links to other Las Vegas sites, any much more.

<http://www.corrypa.com/> - Official site of Corry, PA.

<http://www.eureka.mo.us/> - City of Eureka, Missouri includes tourism information.

<http://stlouis.missouri.org/> - The official website of St.Louis.

<http://www.cincinow.com/> - Cincinnati, Ohio news, information and tourism site.

<http://www.denver.org/> - the Official Denver Travel Guide.

<http://www.sacramento.org/> - City of Sacramento site offering administrative and visitor's information.

<http://www.bradford-online.com/> - Local Bradford, PA website – business, some tourist information.