

Bob Gilbert (00:01):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders, their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I've had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney, Choice Hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah National Parks, Kennedy Space Center, visitor center, and Best Western International plus served on the boards of the U.S. Travel Association, National Tourist Association, and an elected commissioner for Visit California. Looking forward, I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So without further ado, let's get started. For today's episode, I'm delighted to welcome Liz Bitner. Liz is president and CEO for Travel South, which is the largest regional Alliance in the USA. Join Liz myself as we talk about the Genesis of Travel South and how it's evolved. We discuss cooperation between states with common interests, the value of inbound tourism, leveraging outdoor recreation, foodie tourism, Brand USA, and much more. So join us on Tourism Heads and Their Tails.

Bob Gilbert (01:45):

So welcome everybody to another edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. I'm absolutely delighted and honored to have Liz Bitner, who is the CEO and president of Travel South USA. I've known Liz for a number of years. We actually worked together way back. We won't say how many years ago that was, she has been at the helm of Travel South USA, which is I believe the oldest and certainly the largest regional Alliance in the United States. So welcome Liz and, uh, welcome to Tourism Heads and their Tales. And if you could introduce yourself a little and talk about Travel South and what it is, what it does.

Liz Bitner (02:24):

Thanks Bob. Yes. Um, we actually have known each other a really long time. I think, uh, you were just coming into the United States when, um, I was a director of sales of a small Quality Inn in Dayton, Ohio, and we got teamed up for a sales mission in Chicago. And um, from there I went and worked for you for gosh, what 15, 10–15 years. And I actually give you credit for, um, you are the reason that I'm in Atlanta, cause you came and said, I have this great opportunity. You get to live in Atlanta. I said, eh, I don't think so. And he said, well maybe let me put that another way. If you would like to continue to be employed, you get to live in Atlanta. <laugh> well, so I've been here ever since. Um, but thank you for having me and I'm, uh, also honored and delighted to be on your show. So super exciting times as the tourism industry sort of gets back to what it is that we love to do, which is to help people plan their leisure and leisure vacations, both, um, from international audiences coming into the United States and certainly domestic audiences moving around the United States. There's so many cool things to see and do we think the south is super authentic and it's a great place to be and you know, the pandemic has been challenging, but um, I think we're back. I, I think we're beyond that now and we're ready to sort of kick back into high gear. So thanks for having me.

Bob Gilbert (03:46):

So tell me a little history on Travel South. Um, it is unique in terms of the regional alliances that have formed around the country. How, how did it start? How did, did these states decide to work together to be collaborative rather than competitive? Although I would imagine that they're still competitive, but in a slightly different manner, uh, how did this, um, create, how was it created?

Liz Bitner (04:14):

Right. So, um, interestingly there were in 1965, a million years ago, there was only two state travel offices in the entire country and they were in Florida and in Georgia and they both reported to the governors and conversation began with those tourism offices because they were both building what have now turned into welcome centers or visitor information centers. Um, on I 95, 1 going north one going south on the Florida Georgia border. And they said, you know, perhaps we should share, I don't know, best practices at that point, you know, job descriptions, et cetera. And from that grew a Alliance of, of Southern state tourism offices, um, that I feel honored to sort of carry forward, not just the logistics and the leveraging of our resources and what ties us together geographically, but also sort of working towards sharing stories that make the south, um, our food, our music, our culture, more unique, more authentic, um, and taking it up a notch for visitation in order for international visitors to understand they, aren't probably just gonna go to one state, they are going to cross borders. Um, and there's so many opportunities in that for the last, what 57 years we've been focused on leveraging state tourism office resources, uh, to bring more visitors and spend more money in the South.

Bob Gilbert (05:43):

So currently you have, I think 12.

Liz Bitner (05:47):

Yes we do.

Bob Gilbert (05:48):

You have 12 states, any designs on that growing, I guess you're bound geographically by the south, but any, any thoughts on membership expanding?

Liz Bitner (05:57):

Certainly we're about the same size geographically as continental Europe. So I'm not sure that our mission really is focused on getting more states, what we want and what our goals in life are, is to expand the engagement of hotels, the restaurants, the attractions, the state, tourism offices, all the, the destination marketing organizations to sort of reach our highest potential specifically in the international market where we were in a great position pre pandemic. Um, obviously it's been a two year just obliteration of international, uh, yeah, inbound business. We're gonna get back to that. So we have to dig back out of this hole that we're in and then, um, continue to rise and that, um, so I don't see us actually seeking other states. It's more about more engagement within this, within the infrastructure and the network of folks who are interested in marketing globally.

Bob Gilbert (06:59):

Right. And, and that makes a lot of sense because if you are an international traveler, the first road bump that they need to cross is that decision to come to the United States. The second decision is where do I, where do I go? Where do I visit? And they're not just gonna come to one place and go home unless it's a package and you're sitting on a beach somewhere for a week or two weeks or whatever. So the notion of marketing the region, you know, makes all the sense in the world. And, and that certainly helps with the international community. So as we are coming out of the darkness, are you seeing signs of life from the international community? And if yes, then which markets are responding or coming back, uh, faster.

Liz Bitner (07:43):

Absolutely. So we've been very, very fortunate in that while we might have turned our lights to dim during the pandemic, we did not leave any of our core customer bases and markets that, um, we know were also struggling during the pandemic. So we were on the go line when last November, the borders opened and we're able to have an international showcase, which is our opportunity to bring in key tour operators and journalists, trade journalists from around the globe to be on our soil, to experience our food, our music, our culture, meet with our DMO's and attractions and restaurants to sort of, you know, get back to business. And we actually were able to have that the last week in, we were right after Thanksgiving in New Orleans. Um, and since then we have continued Even, you know, the Omicron variant was a, a little bump in the road, but we have continued to do trade outreach, to do earned media, certainly some digital marketing and social media, and we've kept our lights on the entire time. So in terms of markets, though, I would say, you know, we're very keen on the European markets. Um, we have a longstanding good relationship with, you know, everybody from, um, all the travel trade and the, our biggest markets, which are the UK and the German speaking markets, but also new flights from Northern Europe. Uh, there's a new Iceland air flight that starts in May and from Reykjavik to our, um, Raleigh Durham, we have focus in all of the bigger France, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands, Latin America is on our radar. Um, Columbia and Argentina and Brazil have been very good during even during the pandemic. Um, certainly Canada's our biggest market. And then we're super excited about the opportunities for the Aussies and Kiwis from Australia, New Zealand to come back. Um, the flights, they just announced actually today that Air New Zealand is coming back to Houston, which is a perfect gateway and jump right over into Louisiana and follow the south. So

Bob Gilbert (09:50):

Yeah, no, that's that, that's excellent because you know those guys from down under whether you are, you know, Australian New Zealand, they tend, it's obviously further to travel, but they stay longer, meaning that they spend more. So, you know, that's a good, a good market. Um, your members are exclusively, the state travel directors, they're obviously well briefed in travel tourism and the opportunity that those dollars bring into their states. They're also understanding of what's been going on not just in the recent two years, but if we think back over the past 20 plus years with 9/11, SARS, bird flu, global financial crisis, MERS, climate change, and now through COVID, um, it's interesting that as we emerge, you know, there's a lot of, uh, new learnings. You know, we, we had learnings from the past and we, we have this current learning from the last couple of years and I was, I was reading, I think it was Dennis Char was he created a new one liner called uncertainty is the new certainty. So things are gonna change. So we need to be able to agile, flexible, make changes quickly. Um, has your vision of the world changed your approach to marketing and sales based upon that agility, flexibility, speed to change? Um, what, what's your thinking on that?

Liz Bitner (11:15):

Well, that's actually a really good, uh, mantra to use, you know, uncertainty is, is the only thing that certain these days, um, yes, the answer is absolutely. I think, um, but I think it's tempered with the fact we didn't all move to Mars either. So the things that worked well, we need to continue to do those, the things that maybe were outdated and or had reached their legacy positioning, um, you know, there's no reason to go back to that. And so we found ourselves in a really, um, interesting position in that had anyone said the borders were gonna be a hundred percent closed and that, you know, travel was going to stop completely. Most of the travel industry would've said, you know, absolutely not. You're crazy. That's not gonna happen. Um, and yet we found ourselves in that. So, um, and then even I was, uh, obviously old enough to be around for 9/11. You know, there was a resurgence back that came a lot

faster than really this two year lab, because while horrific events, they were very contained. And then there was a sort of a nationalism about the, the travel industry coming back out, you know, the pandemic was a lot longer and it had a lot of uncertainty. So, um, and that as it dragged on, um, but the positives that came out of it were things that, again, here in the south, we, we knew we had great product. We knew we had lots of outdoor opportunities, great national parks, newest national parks in the national park system. As in West Virginia, um, great state parks, we had never really sold those internationally or even domestically. They were more local types of products that we would push and suddenly they became sort of the, you know, the saving grace of the South. So for the most part, we, you know, we muddled through without our international visitation through the summer of 21 and 20, we're very glad that the borders are open. And, um, we think that a lot of that food music, outdoor and culture, um, is gonna adapt. Um, the programming can adapt. I also think that there's gonna be this real slowdown visitation as you come back from international origin markets, as you come back into the U.S, It's gonna be the folks who have already been here probably before that will be our primary for, um, visitation. We don't get a lot of first time visitors, um, to the states. And instead of trying to do 18 states in six days and, you know, and move from city to city, you know, we really believe that folks are gonna engage more at the local level and they wanna, you know, we were pushing live like a local, but I actually think that that's gonna be even more prevalent, you know, eat at really cool burger shacks that you know, are, or are barbecue pits that, you know, I don't have white glove, um, service, but you know, that all the locals know that is the darn best place to go get mud bugs in, or, uh, crawfish in Louisiana or barbecue in North Carolina. And you gotta taste the barbecue sauce in North Carolina, cause it's vinegar based. And then you gotta go across the border into South Carolina, which they use more of a mustard base and the differences of, you know, cook 'em slow and find those really cool places.

Bob Gilbert ([14:37](#)):

You're making me hungry. Liz you're making me hungry. So it was interesting. You used the term mud bugs and I, the only other place I've heard of that term is actually in Australia and it was on the menu, mud bugs. And I was thinking, what the heck is that? But then figured out or found out what it was. But I, I had no idea that that term was used or is used in, in the south. Um, right. So, so yeah,

Liz Bitner ([15:02](#)):

It's a delicacy in its season. So, um, it's top of mind these days.

Bob Gilbert ([15:06](#)):

Okay. Well when I'm down south, I will definitely look out for a mud bug.

Liz Bitner ([15:10](#)):

Right.

Bob Gilbert ([15:11](#)):

So, so what you're seeing then is that if you will, the niche markets kind of morphing into the living like a, or experiencing the, the local flavor, the local community. And I think I'm seeing that in different parts of not just the country, but in different parts of the world where people just want to get away from where they live and their local culture and to experience, to, to kind of immerse themselves in that local experience. And that's what, that's what you are seeing.

Liz Bitner ([15:42](#)):

Absolutely, absolutely. You know, I think the other factor is that as these flights come back and as, um, especially in some of the more traditional style markets that have, that folks have credits on the airlines and with their tour companies that they've held onto, that they aren't in such a hurry to get to the next place, just to take the picture and have the iconic thing that they really do want to understand. If I'm in Nashville, I have to go to Bluebird cafe and it doesn't take reservations. So you have to plan to be there in line long enough to do, you know, uh, and stay in Nashville long enough. So that you're going to do that or go out to Loveless cafe, you know, in the morning and eat just an amazing biscuit, um, because it's the thing to do. And, and if you're always on the move to the next place, you're not really gonna be able to experience that. Um,

Bob Gilbert (16:43):

Has this trend anything to do with the more community enhanced relationship between DMO's and their local community, you know, which is something that destinations international have been, you know, chanting about for the last few years, but you know, to get more community involvement, is this an extension of that or, or is this something new that is visitor driven, than anything else?

Liz Bitner (17:08):

I think it's both tracks, to be honest with you, Bob, because I do think that, um, you know, yes, DI has been pushing, you know, moving from a destination marketing organization to more of a destination management organization. And COVID accelerated that because of the fact that then suddenly all of those businesses that had been depending upon tourists. Um, and then when it suddenly dried up, maybe they hadn't paid as much attention to the DMO as they should have in the past because they were busy running their businesses, suddenly turned and looked and said, where are all, where are the people, what are we going to do? How do I keep my business afloat over, you know, the next, uh, timeframe. Um, and lots of DMO's had, um, amazing programming, some of it through federal funding that was, um, through the RPA funding processes and some of it through state tourism offices that allocated out money to do job fairs, to do, you know, training programs. Um, you know, a lot of them are investing in even getting high school and, um, students that, you know, to go more into work study programs, as opposed to going to four year colleges so that we sort of build back up this workforce, cause that's one of the bigger issues. So I do think that there was that side of it, but I also think, you know, the customer also drives the, uh, marketplace and that's what customers wanna do. You know, you don't wanna go and be gentrified if it's just like your house or your home or your, you know, 30 mile radius of your, of where you live. Well then why would you get on a plane and fly 5,000 miles to see it right? You want to, you want to see and do and eat and experience the cool things that you can't do at your house. And that is the beauty of tourism and especially international tourism because you know, the biggest challenge sometimes the DMO's have, and even state tourism offices, but really at the local level is, well, 90% of my business is gonna come from the domestic market. Why should I even, cause we have 330 million people here in the United States. Why should I even care? Whether anybody from overseas comes because you know, 90% of my business is gonna be from the, the U.S. And I don't have enough money to market in the U.S. Why would I go overseas? Right? Um, Canada or Mexico or wherever. But the answer is that the economic growth of the United States and the balance of trade is so dependent on this international traveler, bringing in these new dollars, the only place that you can experience the south is the south. You can't export that to some place else. There that's monies that an economic development team at a state doesn't have to invest in roads or incentive programs or any of that kind of thing. They come, they spend their money, they, they eat and drink the longer, farther they come, the more money they spend. Um, you know, the average Australian comes for three and a half weeks. Um, they tool around and visit all kinds of cool places and then they go home and that's all new

money and that is the beauty of tourism and especially international tourism. And that's the part, that's the last piece of this economic recovery for the tourism industry that needs to happen. It also truthfully, um, international travelers aren't nearly as, um, seasonal, you know, here in the south specifically, we're really busy in the summer from about may till the first week of August. Um, when the kids are out of school, our mountains are beaches. You know, even our cities they're busy. I mean, you know, it that's when the states or when the destinations make bank, as they say. Yeah. Um, you know, the nice thing about international travelers are they'll come on the shoulder seasons, they stay a little longer, they spend a little more, they're willing to buy a \$35 Grand Ole Opry ticket or a \$65 to get into the country music hall of fame. And those are the visitors that we need.

Bob Gilbert (21:08):

It's, uh, it's truly an invisible export. You know, it is the, the, the money, the monies that are spent by international visitors. It's, it's the same as, uh, uh, somebody in Germany buying a Ford, it's an export, but it's an invisible export that obviously impacts the local community and those tax dollars help those communities invest in hospitals, nurses, firemen, et cetera, et cetera. So there, there is an absolute economic impact on, on those local communities. So I, I imagine that with the international, you, you partner with Brand USA and.

Liz Bitner (21:44):

We do.

Bob Gilbert (21:45):

So any, um, what are the, the benefits to the audience of partnering with Brand USA as an example?

Liz Bitner (21:52):

Well, so, um, we were one of the very first organizations. I think we were the first international, uh, regional organization that leaned in when brand USA first enacted the, you know, corporation for travel promotion. Yeah. And, and it was a huge leap of faith for all of the south. And we have seen just an exponential support and partnership with Brand USA. That's helped. We helped them, they help us. Um, and certainly the omnibus bill that they were awarded, uh, \$250 million to help back fill the ESTA funds, which are basically Brand USA was funded by international visitors who were part of a visa waiver program and didn't, and paid a fee. And so it was basically taxing international visitors so that we could then fund programming to bring in more international visitors. Right. It's like the most beautiful tax on the planet. Right, right. Um, but the last two years have obviously with the borders being closed, that thought of money had been depleted. And so this, this 250 is really just to sort of, uh, backfill the ESTA fund so that we have enough money to compete with. Because as you mentioned early on, you have to convince them to come to the United States. I don't have a shot at bringing them to the south unless they start with, oh yeah, I do wanna go. I do wanna go to the states, whether it's for my fifth time or it's my first time I wanna go to the United States and every other country on the planet has been in market since about January pushing hard. They want people to go to Thailand. Canada had a, Canada has a \$70 million international campaign going and they spent, uh, like 20 million just to keep Canadians in Canada. So we're really competing against the world. Um, and so I'm thrilled that, um, Congress allocated the money to Brand USA. We will continue to partner with them and we have some super unique programming that we do with them that helps us differentiate ourselves in the consumer market, especially consumer outreach. And we don't feel competitive with the rest of the United States because we think that folks who like the states internationally this time they're gonna come to the south

next time they may go to the, you know, the great American west third time. They may go to Alaska and then the, um, and then fourth time they come, they can come back to the south cause they probably didn't see it all. Cause we're a huge right. You know, we're pretty, pretty large.

Bob Gilbert (24:26):

Exactly. Right. But you're right. From an international perspective, it's a market share game and you need to be able to invest as any product demands. You know, you, you, you need the share of share of voice, share of mind and then ultimately share of wallet and um, you know, it's

Liz Bitner (24:43):

Yeah, I have to laugh sometimes because you know, politicians don't necessarily sometimes believe in investing in marketing for, um, tourism product that it looks like it's a fluffy thing. And you're like, well, how did you get elected? You invested in advertising to get elected. That means that you understand the value of advertising, same thing in the tourism business. If you don't advertise it, then how will anyone ever know to come there?

Bob Gilbert (25:11):

It's not exactly a field of dreams. <laugh>,

Liz Bitner (25:13):

It's not, yes, no, you do not build it. And they automatically got absolutely there, a lot of beaches, mountains, food, right. Music different than us, but there's a lot of other places that people could choose to go and we hope that they choose the U.S. And then specifically that they choose

Bob Gilbert (25:30):

The south. Right. So tell me, um, and this is the final question, um, for you and really appreciate your time here today, but I'd like to know a little bit more about your work with UNESCO and the world heritage organization and your civil rights, uh, sites. Can you bring us up to date on, on that?

Liz Bitner (25:51):

So one of my very favorite niche projects that we're working on and uh, we run the U.S. Civil rights trail marketing Alliance, which is made up of 14 different states that have about 130 plus sites, um, across mostly the south. But it also includes, um, Florida. And it includes, um, Kansas with Brown versus Board of Education from Topeka. And this whole project was really started because the state travel director in Alabama would wanted to have a couple of his, the two churches, one in Montgomery, one in Birmingham and the Selma bridge to become world heritage sites. And the Department of Interior who manages that U.S. Department of Interior, um, who presents it to UNESCO, um, said, well, if the United States doesn't value these sites, why would the world value these sites? And so we took a sort of a hard look at ourselves and said, you're right. We don't have any sort of, um, collaborative style marketing and collection of churches and sites and museums and historic markers that really acknowledged the civil rights movement, which was a very grassroots movement. It wasn't, you know, there are a couple of high profile people like Martin Luther king Jr. Obviously from here in Atlanta. But I mean, it was a very grassroots movement through the fifties and sixties. And so that's really the impetus between behind the U.S. Civil Rights trail. The marketing Alliance is just a, a vehicle to collaborate our monies. And we are on the track to have a handful of the hundred and 30 sites probably. I don't know, you know, it'll end up being eight to 10 of those, um, to become world heritage sites. Um, and that's a very long process. It

is very expensive. Most countries have a department, a tourism of ministry that actually takes forward those type of programs. The U.S. doesn't do that. So we're sort of filling in the blank here because we believe that in the next couple of years, we will be submitting a serial nomination that will include eight or 10 sites on that are on the U.S. Civil rights trail that will become UNESCO world heritages. Um, putting us on par with the Eiffel tower, the, you know, the Rome Coliseum and the Great Wall of China, because that's where the value of those sites belongs.

Bob Gilbert (28:19):

Yeah. Well I think it really is. It's the heritage, right?

Liz Bitner (28:23):

Correct.

Bob Gilbert (28:23):

Which, which represents the history, the culture. It's not just, I think for an international community, although UNESCO are a worldwide organization, um, but for our domestic market as well to, um, to recognize and understand what the trail represents and the history and the importance of it. So kudos, to you.

Liz Bitner (28:46):

Especially during this time right now, you know, there is a awakening of the United States over the pandemic and all of the civil unrest, you know, if we don't acknowledge and recognize what the stories of the past are, then we are in danger of continuing to repeat those. And so I think you have to understand all of the civil rights movements and, um, and their focus on the laws, the equal schooling opportunities. And certainly, um, the south was part of that. We were ground zero for all of that. So it's it, it's our job to continue to tell those stories to young people, as well as, uh, folks who maybe forgot what they learned in fifth grade.

Bob Gilbert (29:28):

Yep. No, absolutely. And, and I think that ultimately great marketing is about great stories. It's storytelling and you know, who tells the best story eventually wins. And you've shared with us some, um, some great stories today and updates on what's happening in Travel South. And I just wanna thank you, Liz. Again, we we've been, uh, joined today by Liz Bitner president and CEO of Travel South on this addition of Travel Heads and Their Tales. Thank you very much, Liz.

Liz Bitner (30:01):

My pleasure.

Bob Gilbert (30:03):

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