

Full Transcript:

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that invites travel and tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on key industry issues. My name is Bob Gilbert and I'm the general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander. My career spans over three decades in the travel and tourism industry where I've had the privilege of working with iconic brands and so many amazing colleagues who in their own ways are pushing the industry forward and using tourism to increase understanding, access and quality of life. For those who work in travel, those that love to travel, and the communities that benefit from travel, I'll be bringing you into the conversation with top professionals who are shaping the industry, all with their unique tales and perspectives that they're ready to share with you.

Bob Gilbert (1:06):

Welcome to another freshly brewed episode of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Today we welcome a very well-respected thought leader in the DMO world President and CEO of Visit Savannah. Joe Marinelli. Welcome, Joe.

Joe Marinelli (01:23):

Well, thank you. It's nice to be with you and look forward to a fun conversation.

Bob Gilbert (01:27):

Yeah, likewise. Tell me, you have roots that go back to Cleveland, which is, you know, very different to Savannah. What was that journey? What was that trigger point that, you know, you thought, you know, what time to look at something different? How did you arrive in Savannah?

Joe Marinelli (01:48):

Well, I had the good fortune of starting my hospitality career with Marriott Hotels in Cleveland, Ohio, which is my hometown. And back in those days, the program was called Marriott's ID Training Program for Individual Development Training. And I went through that program, worked in every department of the hotel, and before I knew it, maybe because I talked too much, I ended up working as a very junior sales guy for the Cleveland Airport Marriott in Cleveland, Ohio. After a couple of years of that, was recruited away by Westin Hotels in resorts and, spent a little over 17 years with Westin in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., New York City, which was the Plaza Hotel.

Joe Marinelli (02:43):

And then Charlotte, and then was recruited to get back home to Ohio where I went to what was then the Columbus CVB as the number two guy eventually became experienced Columbus. I spent 10 years there before taking the top job here in Savannah. So, it's been a good 35 plus years, and I've been very fortunate to get the opportunities that I've had and haven't messed it up too much yet.

Bob Gilbert (03:13):

But your background is as interesting in so far as you understand what it's like to be in the trenches. You understand that you can't sell a room that you didn't sell last night. You start over again with that approach. Obviously, you, you do, as we look at forecasting and, but you understand it from your

stakeholder's perspective and how important TOT is and all the fun occupancy and RevPAR and, you know, ADR you, you understand that it certainly gives you a head start. Could you share with our audience what is your vision for Savannah's future? How do you plan to achieve it in broad terms?

Joe Marinelli (04:05):

Well, it's an interesting question and a fascinating one at that, our city was founded by General James Edward Oglethorpe from England in 1733. And shortly after he landed here in Savannah and actually founded Savannah and founded the state of Georgia. He sailed back to England and there are stories that he proclaimed as he pulled away from the dock. Don't change a thing until I get back.

Joe Marinelli (04:34):

Some would argue that in Savannah, in some ways nothing has changed since 1733 and in other ways everything has changed since 1733. But we are enjoying being one of the top destinations in the United States for, visitation. And as we look forward, we see the continued evolution of our tourism product. We are, doubling the size of our convention center that should be open later this year. We have a number of new hotels coming into the market in the next 24 to 36 months, and our product continues to evolve in a way that attracts, you know, visitors not only from all, all over the country, but in these days all around the world. So, our team really is focused on innovation and creativity and being the best sales and marketing professionals in the business and keeping Savannah somewhere near the top of everybody's "want to visit list."

Bob Gilbert (05:40):

So clearly your background in hospitality puts you in a great position, you know, with a growing conference space that you have. And, you know, we are seeing meetings coming back now more than we've seen, obviously back in, in the dark days of 2020 with the pandemic. But there's a lot more competition. There's ARPA funds out there, you know, being spent as rapidly as they can. How do you differentiate your destination from competitors in the market?

Joe Marinelli (06:14):

Well, our competitors are not just other cities these days. Our competitors are things like TikTok and Netflix and whatever the hot thing is in today's world. So, we have something special here. We'd like to consider it our own Savannah style of hospitality. And, you know, we work hard to be a very welcoming community. In doing so, that means that our service standards have to be top notch. We have to convey to our visitors that we're glad that they're here. And I think that when we read our reviews, whether it's TripAdvisor or Google or on our website or social media, that warmth and welcoming spirit is really what sets us apart. You know, every city has bricks and mortar, and we sort of fit right in the middle of all of that in terms of number of hotel rooms and great culinary experiences and so forth. But here you have people that generally are in a very good mood, generally are excited to welcome visitors to our destination, and you mix all of that with pretty terrific weather most of the year and makes us a popular place to want to visit.

Bob Gilbert (07:37):

So, tell me a little bit about how are you as a DMO structured and funded? I'm not going to presume, you know, what is your structure.

Joe Marinelli (07:48):

Visit Savannah is the largest business unit of the Savannah Chamber of Commerce. I kind of smile when I say that because the Chamber of Commerce side of our business is about a \$1.9 million operation and Visit Savannah is about a \$19 million operation. So, it's a little bit like the tail wagging the dog, but we operate the two organizations completely independent of each other. And our organization gets a slice of the hotel motel tax from the city and the county, which represents probably 86 or 87% of our revenues. And then we also, generate additional revenue streams through advertising sales and the like. So, we're built, fairly traditional in terms of having a structured sales team that's focused on conventions, meetings, group tour, international travel. We have a structured marketing and communications team that is covering all the bases from website to digital marketing, marketing to content development, video production, social media. We have five visitor centers, located around the destination. And it really, it's a model that works very well for us.

Bob Gilbert (09:13):

So, the last time we met was a few years ago, and we, we shared a panel in at DI's annual event. It was in Baltimore. And I remember at that moment in time, 2021, one of the challenges that, well, not just Savannah but you know, the country was facing, was workforce. And I don't think that too many people are aware of, of how significant Savannah is, you know, from an economic perspective, you know, being on the Atlantic, you know, having an amazing shipping industry that, you know, with ships that travel the world. But from a challenge perspective, what are your biggest challenges that you face today and how are you addressing them?

Joe Marinelli (10:07):

Well, I think you bring up workforce development and that's always going to be at or near the top of, of anybody's list. In our case, we are teaming up with our economic development authority. It's called the Savannah Economic Development Authority, or SEDA, and we're sort of taking the show on the road this summer. We are going to do a 13-week 12 city promotional tour. We have leased one of the trolley, buses from one of our partners here in town. We're going to wrap it in in our visit Savannah colors and logos. And we're going to hit a dozen cities in the northeast and upper Midwest to not only promote visiting Savannah, each of the 12 cities are nonstop flight cities to our community. So, we're promoting visiting Savannah in every sense with whether it's a leisure trip or a meeting or a convention. But then we'll also partner with SEDA to promote workforce opportunities in our community. We very intentionally identified cities that like a Buffalo or a Cleveland, that maybe too many people are either unemployed or underemployed, and we're going to go to their front door and tell them a little bit about what makes Savannah special, whether it's to live or work. And we're excited about the opportunity that tour will kick off, late May and run through Midgut, and we hope to do it again next year as well.

Bob Gilbert (11:53):

It just makes sense in terms of combining the tourism piece, you know, with the economic development piece, because I guess it is a truism, I'm not going to quote the whole quote from Moira Gast, but you know, if you build a place where people want to visit et cetera, et cetera. Right. So, it does make sense. Plus I think it's smart, you know, you're going to go to, you said you'll be targeting the Northeast and you know, the last time I looked and I lived, you know, my wife and I were in in Buffalo for about 10 plus years. Where would I prefer to be in the middle of winter, Savannah or Buffalo with no disrespect to Patrick Kaler and the folks there in, in Buffalo or John Percy up in Niagara Falls. But I think you have a preferred climate in Savannah, so it makes it makes a lot of sense. Very clever.

Joe Marinelli (12:51):

Yeah, no question. Patrick and John are good buddies and, you know, there's a time of the year that their part of the country is ideal as well. But you know, we're, sort of excited about this initiative and, and then how to measure it and determine, the success of it. But we're doing something that no other destination is doing, and that's founded in, in the creativity of a really sharp team here at Visits Savannah.

Bob Gilbert (13:21):

So, you know, this kind of leads into the importance of partnerships and collaboration. From your perspective and from Visit Savannah, I mean, how important are partnerships and collaborations in driving success for your destination?

Joe Marinelli (13:39):

One of the greatest compliments that we can get is when a convention planner, meeting planner group, tour planner comes to town for a site inspection or a familiarization trip and says to us as they head out of town, "wow, we're really impressed with how collaborative all of you are in Savannah," whether it's the DMO, the convention center team, our hotel partners, our restaurateurs, and so forth. We're a town that gets it. And so we rely heavily on our partners. They are the product. They rely heavily on us as the marketing machine, and we enjoy the ability to pick up the phone at any time and call any of those partners and say, we have this potential prospect coming to town and we want to put on a good show, and we're going to come to your place to help us do that. And more often than not, they're going to step up in a big way for us.

Bob Gilbert (14:40):

So, the community, the business community, the residents buy in to the value of a visitor economy, if you will. How do you ensure or maintain that high quality and memorable experiences for visitors? How does that communication continue or start?

Joe Marinelli (15:02):

Yeah. Well, you know, listen, I'll be honest with you and your listeners, we face the same challenges that many cities face in fact, probably all cities face with some folks in town that, that say, when is too much too much? When are too many visitors, too many visitors, when are too many hotels, too many hotels. You know, that's not up to us to decide. Our job is to present Savannah and our beach destination, Tybee Island as ideal places to visit. So, I think we do a very good job. We meaning our organization, I think we do a very good job of keeping our elected officials informed, our business and tourism leaders informed, and our community informed with television and newspapers locally here and so forth. We like to keep them informed of the success stories. What are the numbers? What do those numbers mean? And heck, we're not afraid to share the news when, when we maybe lose a big opportunity that would've been good for us. So, I think that helps us build credibility in town and while we have detractors, just like every town does. You know, a recent Longwoods Resident Sentiment study tells us that we really have, you know, have the support of the majority of, of the folks that live here.

Bob Gilbert (16:28):

Obviously with Covid, you know, things kind of changed or got accelerated, but, you know, we are seeing within the DMO world, you know, the evolving makeup or mindset for DMOs from, you know, whether it be stewardship, sustainability, responsible tourism, how do you address those? I was going to say concerns, but there are also opportunities as well. So how do you address that?

Joe Marinelli (16:59):

Well, we don't try to eat the elephant all at one time. We made sustainability a priority in 2022 and chose to really focus internally first on us as an organization and how we embrace a more sustainable organization before we go out and start hitting on our partners and members and so forth about sustainability. But it's an ongoing effort. It's a collaboration between leadership at the city level, tourism leaders, business leaders, and all working towards the same goal. You know, I sometimes see that these airlines and automakers, you know, set these goals of, you know, they want to be carbon neutral by 2050 or whatever. We have not set any type of artificial goals for our community as yet, but separately, we're taking it very seriously as it relates to everything from eliminating single use bottles of water in our office to, you know, working with the community as it relates to getting more cars off the road and more people either walking or taking a trolley around town. So, it's an ongoing effort. It takes a lot of work, you know, I wouldn't say we're the best at it, but sometimes when I talk to my peers and buddies around the country, I feel like, you know, maybe we're ahead of some of the others.

Bob Gilbert (18:29):

It is interesting. I think you have so many different things to see and do and different communities. And we have a 22-year-old who wanted to come to Savannah. Interestingly, he goes to Miami of Ohio out there in Oxford, you know, so he's graduating in a, in a month or so. But he and his girlfriend wanted to be downtown in the historic, I think it's called the Landmark District.

Joe Marinelli (19:02):

Yeah. Historic Landmark District, yes.

Bob Gilbert (19:04):

Right. And which surprised me, you know, because it was kind of spring break, not that, you know, he's of the, you know, getting on the beach and chug beers and, you know, but he wanted to explore, he wanted to walk, he wanted to see monuments, he wanted to, to enjoy the rooftop restaurants. He took a boat tour at sunset on the Savannah River, enjoyed the, the homes. And I mean, that's just one example of all the different neighborhoods that you have. But it surprised me that the appeal to an, you know, somebody in their early twenties chose Savannah. That's a good thing. I guess I shouldn't be surprised knowing our son, you know, you have so many different things to see and do, how many days? I know you're going to say they should be here for a month, but I mean, how many days is it for somebody to really get a sense of Savannah?

Joe Marinelli (20:00):

Well, first of all, please, thank your son for his interest in Savannah, and I hope that they'll come back. I'm also going to compliment my marketing team for, reaching him in some fashion. So that's good stuff. And I can relate. I have a 22-year-old son as well, and when he comes back from his time at college on long weekends, he brings a buddy or a lady friend, and they want to do all the things that your son wanted to do. So, I get it. You know, I'll be honest with you, I, I think the ideal Savannah getaway is probably three to three to four days, three and a half days, you know, and that doesn't necessarily mean you have to come on a weekend. I like to tell people that the Savannah experience is exactly the same on, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday as it is on Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

Joe Marinelli (20:53):

So, if your listeners come in and visit us for three or four days, they're going to get a, a terrific sense of a really authentic city. Nothing here is manufactured like other destinations have. You're going to experience some wonderful coastal cuisine. You're going to experience some wonderful history and architecture. Our black heritage story here is a terrific one. And we embrace that story for good or for bad. You know, it's part of our history and we don't shy away from that. And so, you know, when you blend in the architecture and the history and the landmarks and the culinary experience and mix it up in a bowl, you're going to fill up three or four days pretty quickly, and then you top it off with a Leopold's ice cream before you go home and everybody's happy.

Bob Gilbert (21:45):

I was going to ask you, I mean, you know, you are the local expert, you know, what lesser-known experiences in Savannah would you recommend to visitors? Now, I know it's a tough question because you, don't want to miss anybody out, but, you know, what are those lesser-known insider experiences that you'd recommend?

Joe Marinelli (22:07):

Well, the first thing I'd say to anybody that visits Savannah is you don't need a car. Once you get into the historic landmark district, it's only about 2.2 square miles. So, everything that you're going to do, you're probably going to be able to walk to and certainly recommend that as part of our sustainability program. Yeah. We have a wonderful array of museums, the American Prohibition Museum. It's the only museum in the country that tells the full story of prohibition in America. We have the National Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum, which is where most of the background research was done for the recent masters of the Air docuseries on Apple TV. Yeah. You know, just walking along our riverfront is fascinating because as you talked about earlier, we have thousand-foot container ships that are passing through our riverfront, and they're close enough that you can almost reach out and touch them. It, it's almost like a live IMAX theater right in front of you, whether you're on a budget or here to splurge a little bit, you know, we have the kinds of products that you're looking for. And then, like I said, you finish it off with some, some local ice cream from Leopold's Ice Cream shop, and I promise you, you'll be back.

Bob Gilbert (23:26):

I've written that down twice now. So, I got the message. So, what is it that you think are, and this is now general in general terms, you know, you are a DMO leader, you serve on a variety of different tourism boards, whether it's, you know, DI, US Travel Association, et cetera. And you've been in this business a while. What leadership qualities do you believe are essential for leading a successful destination such as Savannah?

Joe Marinelli (24:02):

Well, you know, it goes back to something that you talked about very early in this conversation, and I've had the good fortune to start at the bottom and work my way up. And a lot of folks these days will say, well, young people don't want to do that anymore. And I don't believe that at all. I think young people want to grow and develop skillsets, maybe, you know, a little faster than we did back in the eighties and nineties. But, you know, getting that experience really sets a person up to be a leader in the future. Because as you pointed out a few minutes ago, I understand the value of an ADR and RevPAR, and I've been a dishwasher, so I know what those folks behind the scenes are doing. And I've waited tables and managed restaurants, so I know the trials and tribulations that they go through.

Joe Marinelli (24:52):

The first thing I'd say is I encourage people to dig in. And the beautiful thing about this industry is you can live and work in any city that you want, anywhere in the world, no matter where life takes you, you can do what we do. But when it comes to leadership, it's fairly simple. You have to build alliances and relationships with people around you that can help you be successful at what you do. And then you have to build a good team around you. And I would argue that I have the best in the business around me. So, they make me, and us and our community look good every single day. But you got to roll up your sleeves, you got to earn your stripes. It's a little easier and quicker to do these days than when some of us were coming up. But then surround yourself with good people and make them a part of your success story.

Bob Gilbert (25:45):

There's wisdom in those words. And it's interesting, Joe, you know, when I speak to CEOs of destinations or CEOs of hotel chains, it's surprising how many of them started washing dishes. David Kong, who was the CEO for many years with Best Western International. He was with Hyatt for many years, but he started out washing dishes in a hotel. And it's so many stories like that, the world can be your oyster. So, what is it that keeps you up at night? What are those things that, you know, you wish you could change but you can't, but, you know, they kind of gnaw away. What are those things that, keep you up at night?

Joe Marinelli (26:35):

Well, you know, to be honest with you, like anybody else that sits in my chair, I think it's, a couple of things. We see different types of crime happening all over the world, all over our country. And you wonder when it's your city's turn to be in the headlines. You know, I pay a lot of attention to that. I care very, very much about the 30,000 people that make up our tourism and hospitality community. You know, when I got here 18 years ago, there were very distinct peaks and valleys in our tourism seasons, and that meant people would get hired and they'd work for six or eight or 10 weeks, then they'd get laid off and they'd off for eight or 10 or 12 weeks and they'd get rehired. And we've really worked hard to sort of flatten that out so that people don't lose their jobs during the course of the year, and folks are employed heading into the busy holiday season when they need the money the most, and so forth.

Joe Marinelli (27:37):

So, you know, I think about things like that and what we have to do to keep people busy and working and so forth. And then, you know, ultimately, you know, we're dedicated here to the best possible Savannah experience. And that might be the weather, that might be our different, products that we offer. It might just be a simple hello at, at a restaurant or front desk or whatever. And those are things that we spend a lot of time working on and trying to be better at. And I think to a large degree, you know, is what has led to the kinds of success that we've enjoyed over the last 10 or 15 years.

Bob Gilbert (28:17):

I have two final questions, and number one, I want to thank you for being our, our guest today on Tourism Heads and Their Tales. The first question is, what is your forecast? What do you see for the future of tourism within Savannah?

Joe Marinelli (28:34):

You know, it's hard to say. We are about to embark on a real deep dive into how we can increase the number of international visitors to our community over the next 10 years. We do not have nonstop

service to Savannah from any international markets at the moment, so that's a big priority for us. But we also recognize that international visitors stay longer and spend more, and we want to capture a bit more piece of that pie. I mentioned that we're doubling the size of our convention center. That'll be open later this year. We hope to have some news about a new headquarter hotel. So that'll change the face of the amount of conventions and meetings and trade shows that we're able to bring, attracting some new customers and some bigger customers than we've had in the past. But then just really working with our city leadership and our community leadership to manage the growth in a responsible way so we can protect what we call the golden goose here. And that golden goose is the visitor experience. Our research, our Longwoods research tells us that 60% of our visitors make a return visit, and 50% of the 60% come back four times. And that's real important to us, and we want to make sure that we're, we're very focused on those kinds of things.

Bob Gilbert (30:07):

Excellent. Some more words of wisdom and interesting, you know, with Longwoods, you know, you were in Columbus, I think Amir Eylon, who's the CEO at Longwoods. He was in Ohio, if I'm not mistaken.

Joe Marinelli (30:19):

Yes. That's how we got to know each other. Longwoods does all of our, our visitor volume and spending research for us. And I first learned of Longwoods and, started working with them when I was in Columbus. And they're terrific partners and do a great job for us.

Bob Gilbert (30:37):

Excellent, excellent. So, my last question, I said there were two last question, and it's Leopold's, what is your favorite flavor of ice cream? I want to know.

Joe Marinelli (30:47):

It's funny and interesting that you ask that question. We, the gentleman that owns Leopold's Ice Cream, as a gentleman by the name of Stratton Leopold, his family started making ice cream here in Savannah in 1919, and it was his father and grandparents and uncles and so forth. But today, Stratton turned 80 years old over the weekend. He's a former Hollywood movie producer, executive vice president with Paramount Pictures, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And we had a fundraiser for him over the weekend, where we brought some of his movie star friends in and, and honored Stratton. And, and somebody asked him on stage on Saturday night what his favorite flavor was. And, and he sort of sheepishly said vanilla and everybody got a charge out of it, and I don't know if he knew that I was in the audience or not, he said, but if my friend Joe Marelli was asked that question, he would tell you Coffee chip is his favorite. And he is absolutely right. I, I love, Leopold's coffee chip ice cream, and would highly recommend it to your listeners when they visit Savannah.

Bob Gilbert (31:59):

Well, you know, I have another reason to come visit Savannah. It's been a long time, so I think I'm due a visit. Joe, thank you so much. You've been a great guest, and we really appreciate having you here today.

Joe Marinelli (32:14):

Well, thank you. It's been a fun conversation, which I knew it would be. And I wish you the very best and appreciate your interest in our story here in Savannah. Thank you.

Bob Gilbert (32:24):

Thanks for listening to part one of this episode. Please like, subscribe, and leave a review. You can also visit EddyAlexander.com to learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services, and read some of our recent case studies.