

Victoria Isley Full Episode

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. 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 (00:42):

Welcome to another freshly brewed edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Today we are very fortunate to welcome a leader in the DMO world that has a very interesting and intriguing journey. Vic Isley is the president and CEO of Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority. And over her almost 30-year career, she has represented amazing destinations including Bermuda, Bermuda, the island out in the Atlantic, Washington D.C., Tampa Bay, Florida and Durham, and now Asheville, North Carolina. And one of the things that not too many people know, Vic actually grew up on a tobacco farm in rural North Carolina. So, she knows firsthand the value of hard work and her first job in hospitality was as a restaurant server putting herself through college and falling in love with food and I guess food culture to be more specific. So, you know, it's really interesting how many leaders within tourism and destinations started out dishwashing serving. It was from the ground up. So, I'd love to hear a little bit about that story before we dive in into Asheville. So welcome Vic and please fill in some of the blanks there in your journey.

Vic Isley (02:16):

Well, thanks so much for having me. Yes, I grew up in the "Tarheel State," which is North Carolina, down a dirt road on a tobacco farm. I learned how to drive on an F-150 tractor when I was 10 years old and it definitely does teach you the value of hard work. My father was actually the first in his family to go to college and he graduated from NC State, which is here in North Carolina and Raleigh. And I said I wanted to go to UNC Chapel Hill, which was right down the road from NC State in Raleigh. And my dad said he was never going to write a check to Chapel Hill and he never did. So that's how I ended up putting myself through college in restaurants and hospitality. And it really just like you said in my intro, introduced me to food culture. The food scene and hospitality opened the door to travel, and I've never looked back, you know, going to Chapel Hill, I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. So just like anyone else, I got a BSBA with a concentration in marketing and there was one paragraph about place marketing and my principles of marketing book back then and now their entire graduate programs about tourism and hospitality. So, I never knew my job existed when I was growing up. And it's been an industry and a work family, honestly that has just been so rewarding over the last 30 years. I can't, I can't imagine doing anything different.

Bob Gilbert (03:45):

But you have such great experience. And in terms of, you know, I think you also served as CEO for what is now known as Destinations International, which is obviously the world's largest destination marketing, trade association and operated as the executive director of its foundation, which is I guess famous within tourism. And you do serve on the executive board of US Travel Association in a time of change for that particular association. But let's dive back into Asheville. Could you share with our audience what is your vision for Asheville's future? And you know, what plans in place do you have to achieve that?

Vic Isley (04:34):

Great questions indeed. I've been back here in North Carolina since December of 2020 here in Asheville. So I came back to the state and specifically here in Asheville, still during COVID. So I think there were about two or three people in the office here. And because I started my career in destination marketing here in the state, I've known everyone that has sat in whatever version of my seat since 1995. So I've been watching Asheville and I've been a visitor of Asheville over many years. And so coming in during COVID, which was a bit of a pause for everyone in the destination marketing and management business, I said I was going to take the time to really pause and listen and doing that. You never learn anything when you're talking. So I always like to listen. So this is a bit of a different switch for me today.

Vic Isley (05:27):

But through that I started individual listening sessions of people in the community. We were willing to do it over Zoom, whether it was walking down by the French Broad River or having a coffee at Summit Coffee and really listening to them and almost three and a half years into living here in Asheville, I'm over 600 listening sessions individually. And I also took the time to look at strategic plans of many organizations and entities here. And what I learned is that this special place in western North Carolina and the mountains has a lot of common themes, but we don't have a common vision for where we're going. And I think that is a tremendous opportunity for us collectively as a community. For those of you who don't know, Asheville is in the mountains of Western North Carolina. On one side is the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. On the other side is the Blue Ridge Parkway, and they're two of the most visited national Park service units in the entire country.

Vic Isley (06:27):

We also have some of the most ancient mountains. They're not as high as those in the West, but they're older. And we have one of the oldest and ancient rivers in the French Broad River that cuts through. So, it is a place surrounded by natural beauty and it is also a very creative community. Through those listening sessions, one of the things that I learned is about duality and paradox and that there's this ancient matronly, mountains and rivers that are literally shaping how our community grows and has grown. And there's this creative community and creative class of people here who are really determining how it continues to grow and evolve. And so, the idea in destination marketing is that this is a deeply rooted place and it is also ever evolving. And both of those things can be true at the same time. And so that's a really exciting place to be in a community that is growing and thriving.

Bob Gilbert (07:30):

So, it's almost, I don't know if this is the right word, but you know, some kind of spiritual, ancestral historical growth, you know, so you're growing based upon the roots of, you know, what established Asheville maybe in the first place and some of the personality and character and characteristics that kind of took it to a certain point. And now, you know, taking it, you know, you are helping shape with, you know, the community, you know, taking it to the next point, to the next level. What did you learn from those listening sessions? Did it validate what your thoughts were? Did it change your thoughts? Are listening sessions ongoing?

Vic Isley (08:16):

It actually helped form my thoughts and feelings in particular. You know, one of the reasons that I've been in this business as long as I have is because I love what travel does for us as humans. Travel doesn't happen if we as humans don't want to go discover and experience other places, people and cultures.

And it also doesn't happen if there aren't the humans there in the community to deliver that experience. Whether it's a forest bathing in the Arboretum here or delivering a plate of food, it's Ramp season here that is, you know, really thinking about food in Appalachia. So those listening sessions have really helped shape and form the stories that we tell. I talk with our team a lot that quite simply in the most simple terms, our job is to shine a spotlight on the creative community businesses experiences here so that visitors are inspired to choose Asheville, walk through the front door of these businesses and leave their economic vitality here and leave with memories that are going to make them want to come back.

Vic Isley (09:22):

So here in western North Carolina there were these ancient mountains and rivers and there were the Cherokee. And I think that's really important to note and to say out loud in terms of who was here first. And then, you know, thinking about the birth of tourism here from when George Vanderbilt discovered this part of the country and built a, what I call a small little crash pad of Biltmore, which is really the, the largest, privately owned home in the United States today. And really understood how this ingenuity here in this part of the country, because it was often cut off geographically what was the utility in a chair. George Vanderbilt came from New York and said, wow, that's craft and art. And I think that that's something that is really special about this place and about its connectivity. So, Georgia Vanderbilt building Biltmore here really thinking about creative class, thinking about when tuberculosis hit people were thinking about, you know, the fresh mountain air. That's where the Grove Park Inn, which is one of the largest resorts here in Asheville named after Grove and his tonic. So, wellness has always been a part of the landscape here. So, it really is a special and distinct place. And so, our job at Explore Asheville is to really think about telling these people's stories and these places stories and experiences so that their livelihoods are sustained. You know, visitors here in Asheville and Buncombe County last year spent almost \$3 billion in local businesses, which is about 20% of Buncombe county's GDP.

Bob Gilbert (11:09):

You know, you've touched on two points that raise two questions and so one is sustainability and the other is economic impact. Let me look at, just to expand on your comment in terms of the visitor economy. So what is the impact on tourism from the local economy and how does that help support community development?

Vic Isley (11:38):

Oh, that's a great question and a really interesting approach here in Asheville for the Tourism Development Authority. We were created back in 1983 through state legislation. So, when North Carolina occupancy tax legislation goes through the state capitol, which is Raleigh, and I know you've spoken with Denny Edwards, who's my colleague, down the mountain there. So, in 1983 the Tourism Development Authority was created to help spur the economy here. And it's played a significant role in that, even though it's 20% of Buncombe County's GDP, it employs about 17% of our residents and generates about a billion dollars in wages for residents here in our community. For a long time, travel and hospitality has act as the front porch of traditional economic development. Oscar Wong and his family who started the craft brewing movement right here in Asheville, North Carolina before it became ubiquitous just this week are celebrating their 30th anniversary. And Oscar came with his family 30 years ago on a vacation from Charlotte, North Carolina and drove here and fell in love and moved his family here. And that again started the craft brewing movement here. So there really is this symbiotic nature in terms of diversifying the economy.

Bob Gilbert (13:00):

It's interesting you bring up craft brewery, not just because of my accent, but I kind of grew up with that craft brewing experience. But I do recall, and I think it was about 25 years ago when I was in Asheville and it was very difficult to find anything other than the main beer manufacturers that we all see every Super Bowl, but to actually find craft beer. And it was in Asheville that that I discovered craft beer and I thought, wow, the world is changing. This is a wonderful thing.

Vic Isley (13:37):

Indeed. And first of all, if it's been 25 years since you've visited Asheville, it's time for a return.

Bob Gilbert (13:43):

No, that was my first trip because at the time I was working for Choice Hotels, I was heading up their sales and their distribution, but when I started with Choice, we had 400 hotels in two countries. When I left, we had almost 5,000 in about two five countries and we were opening up almost every week. There were new hotels, and it was, you know, we were meeting with hotel developers, franchisees in Asheville and it was like, wow, this is a beautiful place cocooned with the backset of the mountains and you know, the artisans and you know, now it really has grown. I'm not sure what the population was then, but I think now you're probably nudging a hundred thousand people. So, you've got that blend of vibrancy, you know, that art scene, you've got the historical, I won't say it's a renaissance, but I guess there is a little bit of renaissance with the artwork, that you have in the Biltmore, right?

Vic Isley (14:49):

Very much so, yes. And Black Mountain College of Art and Design is based here, which is known around the world. There's craft here it is just really a special place in terms of valuing authenticity, and you see it throughout downtown in the independent shops, in the river arts district, in the artist galleries. The collaboration really in the community is super interesting to watch. Before Farm-to-Table was ever a thing, Explore Asheville started what was a campaign called Foodtopia, which was connecting the farmers and growers and purveyors of Appalachia with people in in the kitchens with chefs and restaurant owners 20 years ago. Back then there were 19 farms that were supplying restaurants and breweries and distillers and the like. And today there are over 200 regional farms that are working collaboratively in sourcing for those restaurants' distillers and brewers and wineries throughout our community. So that idea of being true to place and working with something here is there in today's contemporary world, many people might know East Fork Pottery, which is operated and owned by Alex Matisse, which is the grandson of Henri Matisse. He came here as an apprentice and fell in love with Asheville and has made an amazing business and is known throughout the country but started right here.

Bob Gilbert (16:23):

You referenced the River Arts District. Is that the studios that used to be the factory buildings that transitioned into or evolved into these different artisan studios that then developed into the River Arts District? Is that...

Vic Isley (16:41):

That's correct. That's correct. And that's one of the things that's again, very interesting about Asheville and the Tourism Development Authority is that we are both a destination marketing organization and a destination management organization. So, two thirds of lodging tax per our legislation is invested in destination marketing. And then one third is invested in tourism related capital projects that we partner

with our government partners or nonprofit partners in our community. Over the course of 20 years, we've invested \$96 million into 51 different projects and one of those in partnership with the city was the River Arts District about 10 years ago it was lodging tax money, city money, North Carolina Department of Transportation revenue, as well as Federal Department of Transportation revenue. That's when actually President Obama came here to talk about revitalization and that placemaking investment, which are greenways down the French Broad River, way finding signage, cutting in sidewalk and walkways has really, been a spur of starting development in that part of our community that now has apartment buildings being built. It has its first hotel opened at the end of last year called The Radical, which is an adaptive reuse hotel project. So, it's really exciting to see investment in place and the partnerships that happen in that way and what comes out of that in terms of building community and building a place and experience.

Bob Gilbert (18:22):

You've answered my follow up question on economic impact and clearly, you've just demonstrated the strategies that you have in place where tourism benefits are distributed equitably across the community with some really, really great examples of how the tourism dollars are spread throughout the community to support the growth. So I love that with the Radical, is that RAD after the River Arts District, was that the formation of the word or is that too simplistic on my part?

Vic Isley (18:58):

It's a great start for sure. It's a great start for sure. It is a stunning adaptive reuse project that was a burned out brick factory, cereal factory. The building itself had been abandoned and there was large format graffiti from local artists within the building and the owners and developers embraced that. And so, the artistry that is throughout that property and its rooms are some of that large format graffiti is still there and has really been baked into the experience from those artists continuing to work and sell art in the hotel to the local DJs that are a part of that artist experience and then developed some gallery space next door. And what was also a smaller factory building, it reminds me because going back to the strategic plans from all of these different organizations and entities and I created an eye chart of those strategic priorities to see what the common themes were within the community and then what is tourism's role within that. And that's where we created the four strategic imperatives that help guide the work that we do in travel and hospitality, which some words that you mentioned earlier. First is delivering balanced and sustainable growth, encouraging safe and responsible travel, engaging and inviting more diverse audiences and then promoting and supporting Asheville's creative spirit. So each of those pillars helps guide the work of our marketing and sales and partnership team when we're engaging with community and working on telling and sharing the stories.

Bob Gilbert (20:40):

So with that in mind, because that was my, I said I had two questions that you had struck a chord with me. One was the visitor economy and the other was sustainability and the evolving responsibilities, if you will, of a destination organization. Notice I didn't use destination marketing organization because I think destinations are becoming more universal in terms of responsibility to the community. So a destination organization, you address your imperatives and your pillars. Do you have any examples of initiatives or policies may be a strong word but in place to, to steward the environment and local communities?

Vic Isley (21:28):

Those are great questions. Because we are the destination organization, we aren't the operators of the entity. So as an example, I mentioned before that the Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited national park service unit in the country and comes through Asheville and Buncombe County through a new fund that we have called the Legacy Investment from Tourism Fund or LIFT Fund. Our board just approved \$10 million worth of investments in various projects last week and one of those is the most popular stop on the Blue Ridge Parkway, which is here in Buncombe County, which is the Craggy Gardens Visitor Center and Trails. And so, we are partnering with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation with the Blue Ridge Parkway and with lodging tax dollars to up-fit the experience and interpretation there as well as bathroom facilities which are the most popular stop that have not been renovated since I believe the fifties and are not ADA accessible, they have broken steps and those kinds of things. So, while we do not dictate how many cars are on the parkway, that is up to the National Park Service, we can partner in terms of investment and maintenance in a way that is going to help deliver a quality experience to our residents who use the Parkway a lot and love Craggy as well as visitors who are coming through.

Bob Gilbert (22:58):

So you mentioned their partnerships and I know you have a remarkable history in partnerships, you know, ranging from NFL, NHL, NCAA, PGA, clearly that's a different kind of partnership, but nevertheless, partnerships and collaboration are key to any destination. How important are partnerships in driving success for Asheville?

Vic Isley (23:27):

They're absolutely critical for destination organizations. Having been in these kinds of organizations and different communities throughout my career is I often say we don't control price, we don't control experience, we don't control much here, we don't own any product really. It's really about building those partnerships here within our own community and making those connections. And sometimes it's looking at what's our seemingly conflicting agendas and finding the, what I call the "and" or the intersection, those that are in the Schoolhouse Rocks era of conjunction junction what's your function? Mine has always been and thinking through that, that's partnerships within our own community, from hotels to restaurants to farms to outdoor outfitters to park service units, city and county. And then also thinking about those partnerships that are external that are potential clients to create or bring events to your community. So here in Asheville on the sports side, because you mentioned sports has always been a part of my life and my work life is that the Southern Conference is a conference here that brings their basketball tournament here and has done so for years.

Vic Isley (24:45):

It's very regional in nature, it brings a lot of community engagement and in March of this year it generated about \$5 million worth of direct spending here in our community. On the tennis side, Asheville is one of the few communities in the world that has hosted what is the Billie Jean King Cup tie three times. So that's really been a special relationship with USTA and we sponsored the US Open one year as building on that relationship. And there's also complexity in those kinds of partnerships is that many people do not know that Arthur Ashe, his family was Asheville and that was a former enslaved family. So, there are also tough discussions and conversations to be had in placemaking and histories. Which brings me to the third pillar that we talked about, which is engaging in inviting more diverse audiences. Our team has worked in partnership and in collaboration with community and elders in the black community here to capture and tell the vibrant stories and challenging stories of the black community here in Asheville and Buncombe County through the Black Cultural Heritage Trail that just came out of the ground this winter.

Vic Isley (26:00):

And we have a press trip that we're hosting this weekend that our black travel writers, influencers that are in to be connected to community, to create those opportunities for black businesses to win and thrive. So, it's creating the framework to shine the spotlight on those stories. And importantly when we're doing that is connecting those visitors, guests, people who are experiencing that to businesses to create more opportunities for more people to win through tourism, which goes to that sustainable growth is dispersing people throughout our community, not just in downtown or not just at Biltmore, but throughout farm tours and breweries that are down by the river and other experiences so that again, those dollars are flowing more broadly throughout more businesses.

Bob Gilbert (26:54):

You said we can win from tourism, and I absolutely agree. I think tourism in itself has so many attributes and qualities that go beyond just what one thinks of going and visiting a destination. And I think you've really had a great vision that you've shared with our audience. You've really shared so much insight into your leadership and management qualities and explained, you know, the benefits of travel and tourism and beyond for Asheville and Buncombe County. What do you see as the future for tourism within your community?

Vic Isley (27:38):

Well thank you. I just have a great love for this work for what travel and hospitality does for us as humans. And one of the things that you talked about is, you said, "notice I didn't say destination marketing organization" is that we are in a time of change and evolution in terms of what our respective roles in the community are. And I think just having the opportunity for those listening sessions for those one-on-one conversations is that to me words matter, and travel and hospitality is what we humans do and deliver. And tourism feels like something that gets done to a place and that I think matters in terms of how we think about what our role is in the exchange and then what it also means within our partners like National Park Service or state park organizations or people who are responsible for managing those natural assets that are such an attractor here specifically in our community. Those are things that still get me going and I'm really passionate about and have a lot of time for having conversations with others about, about what that means for the future.

Bob Gilbert (28:52):

Fantastic. Well, your passion shines through and we really, really thank you for being on Tourism Heads and Their Tales. And thank you again, Vic.

Vic Isley (29:03):

We'll see you in Asheville.

Bob Gilbert (29:05):

I look forward to my next trip. Thank you.

Vic Isley (29:07):

Safe travels.

Bob Gilbert (29:11):

We hope you enjoyed today's episode. Please like thumbs up, 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.