



100 Years of Working Together for Atlanta

SGR Honors the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau on its Centennial

BY DANA RICHENS

Atlanta, 1913. The town originally known as “Terminus” for its location at the southern end of the Western & Atlantic Railroad had developed into a young, bustling city in the new, post-war South, replete with telephones, trolleys and new colleges and universities. The Georgian Terrace Hotel, which decades later would serve as the site of the premiere gala for *Gone With the Wind*, had just opened for business at the corner of Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue. A young boy by the name of Bobby Jones had just won the city’s junior golf championship (at the age of 9).

Also in 1913, Atlanta business leaders turned to the lawyers at Smith, Hammond & Smith – a predecessor of today’s Smith, Gambrell & Russell – to draw up a charter for a new organization. Atlanta’s status as a transportation hub had resulted in a disproportionately large number of hotels in the city, and Atlantans saw that growth as an opportunity to promote a fledgling tourism industry. Thus,

on April 29, 1913, the charter was signed, and Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau (ACVB) was born. And for the past 100 years, our firm has been honored to help ACVB in its important work for Atlanta.

ATLANTA AND THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

As ACVB approaches its centennial this spring, its mission remains clear: to sell and market metro Atlanta globally as the premier conventions, meetings and tourism destination in the regional, national and international marketplace, and to favorably impact the Atlanta economy through conventions and tourism.

“Our job is to get more people – visitors, conventioners – here tomorrow than were here yesterday,” explains William Pate, President and CEO of ACVB, “then make sure they visit restaurants and attractions to ensure that the city reaps the full economic benefit of their visit.”

Accounting for more than 223,000 jobs, Atlanta’s \$11 billion tourism industry “is the gasoline that drives the city’s economic engine,” Pate explains. “Tourism generates the largest amount of economic impact just due to the scale of the business.”

“Atlanta is blessed with a business community and governmental structure that appreciates the importance of tourism to the economy,” notes Pate. ACVB’s centennial is even more impressive considering that most other large U.S. cities did not focus on tourism as a source of revenue until the 1940s or even the 1970s, when other convention bureaus finally began to emerge as spinoffs of local chambers of commerce.

ACVB takes particular pride in the collaboration among its 1,200 members – everyone from the Georgia Aquarium and other local attractions, to caterers and transportation providers – who provide the resources necessary to attract and serve Atlanta’s visitors. “Atlanta’s hospitality community is a well-oiled machine,” Pate explains.

A unique feature of ACVB’s work – and one that is critical to the success of Atlanta’s conventions business – is its long-range planning. “Booking a citywide meeting takes



ABOVE: THE GEORGIA DOME, HOME TO THE ATLANTA FALCONS, HOSTED SUPER BOWLS XXVIII AND XXXIV.
 FAR LEFT: A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE IMPRESSIVE MIDTOWN SKYLINE.
 LEFT: THE WORLD-FAMOUS GEORGIA AQUARIUM.

ABOVE: THE WESTIN HOTEL DOMINATES THE ATLANTA NIGHTTIME SKYLINE.
 LEFT: THE EVER-POPULAR FOUNTAINS AT CENTENNIAL OLYMPIC PARK IN DOWNTOWN ATLANTA.



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a lot of time and planning,” explains Gregory Pierce, ACVB’s Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer. “We are working on pieces of business as far out as 2023 to ensure that ACVB is consistently pulling in meetings that serve as strong economic drivers for the city.”

WHY ATLANTA?

Atlanta is considered a first-tier location for conventions, putting it in a select category with just a handful of other cities, such as Chicago, Orlando, Las Vegas and New Orleans. Three factors elevate Atlanta into this elite company. First, Atlanta is the home of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the world’s busiest passenger airport. This means that most meeting attendees, even those traveling internationally, can get to Atlanta via a direct flight. Atlanta tourism is “inextricably linked to the airport,” notes Pierce. Second, the airport is connected by train (MARTA) to numerous hotels within walking distance of likely con-

vention sites. For example, Atlanta boasts 10,000 hotel rooms within walking distance of the Georgia World Congress Center, the fourth-largest convention center in the country. And third, Atlanta has what Pierce calls “destination appeal”: great restaurants located close to hotels, a vibrant arts community, successful sports teams, and exciting nightlife. Indeed, Atlanta’s status as the fifth largest hotel market in the U.S. has created what Pierce calls a “spillover” effect that has led to the elevation of Atlanta’s dining scene. Today, people eat out in Atlanta more than any other city, and Atlanta is ranked third among cities influencing the national “food dialogue.”

“With both the leisure and convention markets, people ask, ‘What is there to do in Atlanta?’” Pierce explains. “But once we get them here, the perception gap closes, and people become serial visitors.”

Atlanta’s racial and cultural diversity is also an enormous selling point for the city. “According to *Forbes* magazine, Atlanta

attracts more minority-run firms on a per capita basis than any other major U.S. city, and that’s a great selling point for meetings,” Pierce notes. “We are a diverse city with a diverse hospitality industry and that has enabled us to build a strong portfolio of minority meetings.” The Martin Luther King, Jr. historic district is the most popular destination among both U.S. and international visitors to Atlanta, and will be complemented in 2014 by the new National Center for Civil and Human Rights. And Atlanta’s large gay and lesbian population makes it a popular destination for LGBT leisure travel.

Atlanta is a city with something for everyone, and ACVB is here to ensure that business and leisure guests from around the world visit Atlanta, time and again, to find their something special. ■

Smith, Gambrell & Russell is general counsel to ACVB, and congratulates the Bureau on the milestone of its 100-year anniversary.