

Heritage tourism holds promise

By AMY CATANIA
Historic Saranac Lake

Saranac Lake's future is looking brighter these days, and one promising area of economic growth is tourism.

Tourism is one of the largest employers in the United States, providing 7.4 million jobs. Domestic and international travelers spend more than \$758 billion in the United States. People come to Saranac Lake for many reasons — the beautiful natural environment, the thriving arts scene and Can-Am Rugby weekend, just to name a few. We can expect an increase in all tourism areas as the Hotel Saranac comes back. In particular, we anticipate more tourists seeking a certain type of visitor experience — heritage tourism.

What is heritage tourism?

The National Trust defines heritage tourism as “traveling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past.” It is a growing industry. Small and large towns around the country are paying attention and focusing their marketing efforts to attract this sector.

From Charleston, South Carolina, to Cooperstown, there is a growing awareness of the economic benefits that come when communities preserve and market their unique historic and cultural resources.

Heritage tourism includes experiences such as visiting museums, taking historic tours, and visiting boutique restored hotels like the Hotel Saranac. Since the 1980s, there has been a surge in popularity of historic hotels, as evidenced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Historic Hotels of America program, which lists 234 properties across the country.

Who are heritage tourists?

Many retirees enjoy heritage tourism, and with 10,000 people retiring a day, this demographic is growing. Interestingly, the majority of tourists of all ages seek out some

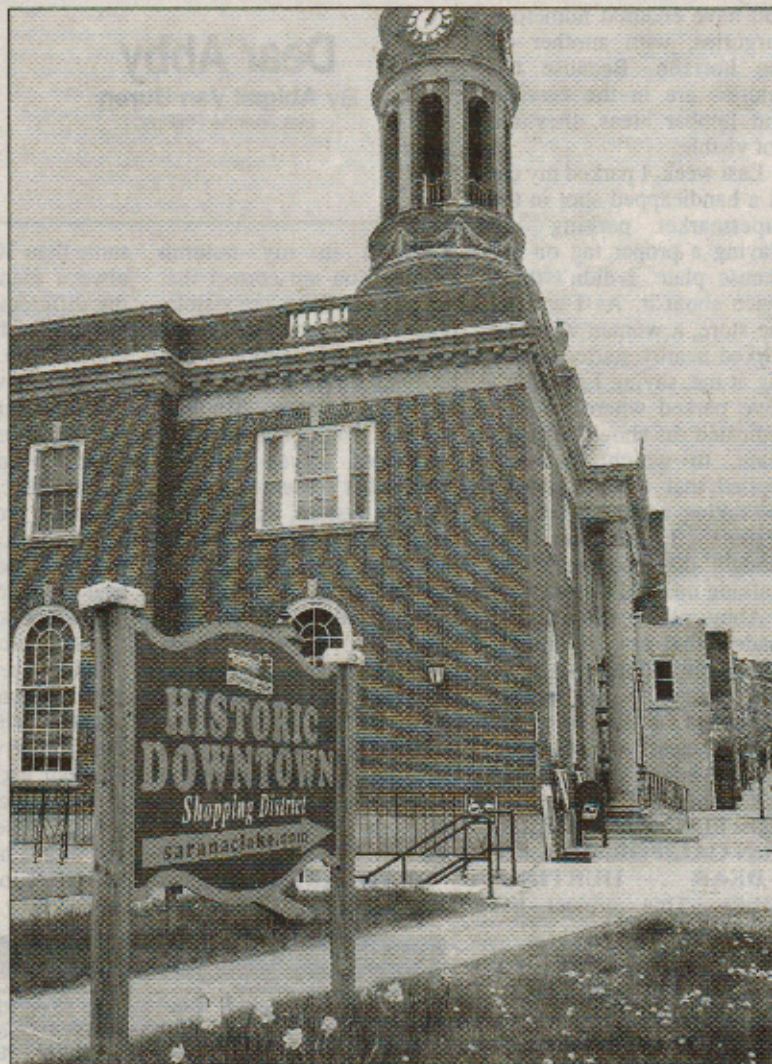
type of historic or cultural attraction during their travels. According to a 2009 national research study for the U.S. Cultural & Heritage Tourism Marketing Council in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Commerce, 78 percent of all U.S. leisure travelers participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling. The study found that a significant portion of these tourists make choices about where they visit and how long they stay based on the historic and cultural attractions in the area.

How is heritage tourism good business?

Studies show that heritage and cultural tourists spend more money and stay longer than other tourists. On average, these visitors spend \$994 per trip compared to \$611 for all U.S. travelers. Wanting to experience the “authentic” things about the local community, they typically aren't interested in chain restaurants or strip malls. Here in Saranac Lake, these tourists support our local businesses, keeping dollars in the local economy.

Heritage tourism is already here

Heritage tourism is something that has been quietly feeding our local economy for years. People from around the world visit the village to experience our old fashioned Main Street and discover our unique story as a pioneer health resort. Some visitors are drawn to Saranac Lake because of an interest in medical and science history. Some have a family connection to tuberculosis or an interest in one of the important people who visited the area such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Bela Bartok, Martha Reben or Mark Twain. Some come to visit other area historic sites and attractions such as White Pine Camp, the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, John Brown's Farm, or the Six Nations Indian Museum. Others just care about history in general and are curious



Downtown Saranac Lake

(Photo courtesy of Historic Saranac Lake)

about Saranac Lake's unique past. Since opening to the public in 2009, we have witnessed dramatic growth in the numbers of visitors to the Saranac Laboratory Museum, with last year's museum attendance more than doubling from the year before. In 2013, Historic Saranac Lake served more than 2,600 people with on- and off-site tours and presentations.

Our community has worked for years, in the face of difficult economic times, to preserve our architecture and history and to

maintain the character of our historic downtown. These are valuable assets that, together with the historic Hotel Saranac, will drive a new era of heritage tourism, bringing economic revitalization to the entire community. Preserving our historic buildings and resources, and planning marketing efforts that reach out to heritage tourists, will pay off for all of us.

Sources:

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