



## THE SCIENCE BEHIND FALL COLOR:

*Travel destination immersion through digital storytelling*

- BRAND JOURNALISM: Project URL <http://www.exploreasheville.com/science-behind-fall-color/>
- SUPPORTING MATERIALS: See attached PDFs to walk through the strategy behind project multimedia elements, as well as a heat map showing user engagement.

### PROJECT SUMMARY

While people know Asheville, NC as a travel destination for leaf peepers, many don't realize that the area is actually home to the longest and most colorful fall foliage season in the world. Using immersive and responsive digital technologies the Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau (ACVB) entered a new age in destination storytelling in 2013 with "The Science Behind Fall Color." Mysteries of nature, extreme mountain topography, unmatched biodiversity and forgotten harvest traditions were leveraged as powerful visual and viral web tools to wow experiential travelers.

Not only did this branded online content project impact longstanding visitation patterns that clustered around a perceived brief window of peak color, but it illuminated a dangerously complex subject and proved that "talking science" to folks in search of a vacation can inspire travel and deepen understanding of a seemingly well-known destination attribute.

### CHALLENGE

Fall is a peak season in Asheville, but travel demand clusters around a desire to find the exact "right" time to view the autumnal display at its "peak." Fall colors begin at the highest elevations early in the season (late September) and travel down the mountains into lower elevations well into November, offering visitors a uniquely broad timespan to visit.

The ACVB has long tried to communicate that elevation variations, weather and over 100 species of deciduous (leaf shedding) trees combine to create one of the longest fall foliage seasons in the world. However, visitation patterns showed that this message was not connecting.

Examination of fall occupancy week-by-week revealed a heavy saturation of travel around two weeks commonly considered the peak of Asheville's fall color. Understanding of Asheville's target audience of experientials suggested that they would be open to travel beyond a narrow, crowded window of visitation if a deeper connection to Asheville's fall color story could be established.

### OPPORTUNITY

ACVB saw an opportunity when a Pulitzer Prize was awarded to a *New York Times* project that charted new territory in online storytelling, using multimedia to bring a complicated story to life and debunking myths that long-form editorial could not engage a modern audience accustomed to news in 140 characters. The ACVB endeavored to be the first destination to leverage this new brand of storytelling. And, thus, was born: *Asheville Storylines*, a series of rich media editorials designed to enlighten, engage and inspire potential travelers through a deeper understanding of what makes Asheville a world-class destination. Welcome to the first

installment: The Science Behind Fall Color—destination immersion through digital storytelling conceptualized, directed, designed and executed in-house by the ACVB.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. Increase awareness of the extended nature of Asheville’s fall foliage season as exemplified by a shift to a more even distribution of Buncombe County hotel occupancy throughout the 2013 season, specifically the period of time that falls outside of what are commonly considered Asheville’s “peak weeks,” generally October 13 and October 20.
2. Deepen the understanding and connection to Asheville as a distinct, world-class fall color destination with rich cultural adventures by creating an environment of web user engagement as exemplified by 1) a 25 percent increase in time on site; and 2) an even level of engagement with digital assets throughout the story, including those toward the end of the piece.
3. Effectively shift readers from a place of travel inspiration to one of travel aspiration through online storytelling synergy by fusing captivating editorial, engaging media assets and practical fall vacation information as exemplified by 1) funneling users through the entire multimedia project and 2) effectively offloading them, at the end of the piece, to one of four KPI pages on the main fall site that indicate a higher intent to travel.

## **AUDIENCE**

Experientials: Southern region adults 25-54 characterized as curious, open-minded and seeking unique cultures and attractions.

## **PROGRAM STRATEGY**

- Use web-based multimedia storytelling to illuminate two compelling stories: 1) The surprising scientific theories that explain why leaves change color in the fall and differentiate Asheville as a unique color destination; and 2) Tales of Appalachian fall traditions that offer a deeper connection to the harvest experience in the mountains of Western NC.
- Create “wow factor” story graphics that are sharable, newsworthy, inspiring and useful for fall travelers.
- Knowing that user engagement relies as much on function as on form, employ responsive web design to ensure that users can experience the story across devices.
- Meet users in the places where travel planning is already happening by integrating the project across ExploreAsheville.com, as well as social and PR channels.
- Mobilize destination and media partners to reach new travelers who may not be connected with ACVB.
- Identify conversion pathways (KPI pages) to deliver travel content to engaged users and measure intent to visit.

## **TACTICS**

- Outline what we know about Asheville’s fall color season and how it differs from other destinations.
- Interview regional leaf expert to illuminate the surprising science behind autumn.
- Interview local heritage consultants to give the concept of leaf-peeping regional context and sense of place.
- Engage a writer with experience using a light-hearted voice to illuminate complex topics.
- Utilize HTML5 and responsive design to create an immersive web experience.
- Highlight story elements that are inherently or breathtakingly visual and demand photos, videos, maps and animation in order to “show” the story as much as to “tell” it.
- Create the project’s central visual—an animation that simulates flying over the mountains as the progression of color makes its way down the slopes. (This proved to be a significant challenge, matching key geographical features with corresponding

Google Earth data, creating the right fly motion to best showcase locations and colorizing aerials to balance illustration and reality.)

- Design additional multimedia elements to 1) draw the visitor deeper into the story—a video to explain a complicated theory, or a map that illustrates fall color around the world, for example—or 2) connect the story with known travel and social engagement motivators—a road trip itinerary or a time lapse video of scenic views.
- Craft medium-specific messaging to extend reach and capture additional views via paid search, social media promotions and strategic sharing with destination and media partners.

## **EVALUATION & RESULTS**

Between September 20 and November 16, 2013 the project saw more than 40,000 unique page views. Social reach through Facebook was more than 318,000 with 6,500 likes and 2,077 shares. Editorial and media mix proved engaging, as time on site averaged 8 minutes, more than double the average time spent across ExploreAsheville.com.

The key beacon of success was that Buncombe County hotel occupancy grew 5.2 percent following the project launch. Furthermore, week-by-week spread actually moved away from historic patterns concentrated around the two already saturated peak color weeks. Those weeks maintained peak status at 96+ percent occupancy, but growth rates remained flat or slightly negative at .9 or -0.3 percent. Exciting to the ACVB, was that weeks on the outskirts, from September 29 through November 16, showed significant growth with an average of 7.1 percent. Further highlighting the benefits of this increase in broadened demand across the season was an increase in overall Average Daily Rate during this timeframe at 6.8 percent.

The ACVB also leveraged the project in its seasonal news blitz. Story pickup included *About.com*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Gadling/AOL*, *Google Earth Blog*, *Raleigh News & Observer* and ten broadcast interviews in key drive markets. PR integration extended the potential message reach by 36.7 million.

Heat mapping of the project website illuminated “white hot” and evenly distributed engagement with media elements all the way to the end of the project (see visual aid). Finally, conversion was achieved. The four KPI/travel intent pages at the bottom of project—book a room, scenic drives, weekly color report and fall excursions—saw more than 50 percent traffic growth over the previous year, so users were indeed inspired to take the next step in their fall travel planning.

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