

The Lowcountry was made for geotourism. With its wealth of natural and cultural resources, the Lowcountry is already a destination of choice for thoughtful travelers. But geotourism? Embracing geotourism would take us to an entirely new level of coolness.



By thoughtful travelers I mean those super-polite people who approach the places they visit with an attitude of respect. While they are here they are pleasant, tidy and appreciative. And then they go home.

They understand that if you want to be a thoughtful traveler, you tread lightly – you leave a place just like you found it, right?

Maybe.

Thoughtful travelers, it turns out, can do more than just maintain the status quo at a tourism destination. They can, by virtue of the choices they make when traveling, help make a place better.

For those of us who think the Lowcountry is absolutely wonderful, the idea of making it better somehow might seem ridiculous. After all, the region is already a treasure trove for thoughtful travelers. We've got the Gullah heritage and Pat Conroy, plus various war and conflict related stuff (Spanish, French, Indian, Revolutionary, French again, Civil, Spanish American, Jim Crow, First and Second World, Korea, Cold, Civil Rights, Vietnam, and land developers, in rough chronological order).

Also porpoises, birds, barrier islands, plantations, national historic landmark districts and wildlife refuges, and the ACE Basin. And the high-culture cherry on this geographic hot fudge sundae: Auldbrass, the Frank Lloyd Wright house with all the funky angles.

From a traditional tourism perspective, these things are not so special in and of themselves. What's worse, compared to some other destinations, the Lowcountry does not compare so favorably. For example, they have porpoises in Florida, too, plus they have better-looking Spanish sites, like St. Augustine with its massive colonial-era Castillo de San Marcos. In terms of wow factor, the Castillo totally overwhelms the Lowcountry site of Santa Elena, which is basically a piece of dirt situated next to a middling golf course on Parris Island. Not awe-inspiring, to say the least.

And there will always be some other tourism destination that can beat us in the one-upsmanship game. We may have porpoises down here on the Atlantic coast, but up in the Pacific Northwest they have something even better – whales. Whales definitely trump dolphins in the bragging rights hierarchy of marine mammal watching.

The key word here: one-upsmanship. If you look at single tourism element in isolation, you can always find a destination that can totally one-up what you've got. But if you take a broad array of tourism elements and place them in a unique configuration, what you've got in your hands is a truly distinctive experience.

The point is that there is not one single tourism element – natural or human-made – that makes our destination unique. What makes the Lowcountry special is the juxtaposition of many disparate elements.

For instance, there is no other place in the world where, by day, one may eat grits, take a carriage tour and visit a Frank Lloyd Wright house, then by night, party at a happenin' spot like Club Chippawillow ("Only for the Grown & Sexy") and on the way home, run over an alligator. By the way, Auldbrass tours are scheduled for November 7 and 8, 2009. If you want to go, get your tickets early. Otherwise if it sells out you will have to wait two years – the next public

Auldbrass tour won't take place until 2011.

Tickets for Auldbrass are available through the Beaufort County Open Land Trust. Unlike the exclusive Club Chippawillow, the Beaufort County Open Land Trust does not require that its patrons be Grown & Sexy. At least not yet.

Back to geotourism and the Lowcountry.

National Geographic defines geotourism as "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents."

So it's like a step beyond sustainable tourism, which is kind of passive – you know, leaving a note for the hotel maid if you don't need the sheets to be washed, that sort of thing.

According to the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations these are some of the qualities of geotourism:

□□□ **Geotourism is synergistic:** All the elements of geographical character work together to create a tourist experience that is richer than the sum of its parts, appealing to visitors with diverse interests.

□□□ **It involves the community.** Local businesses and civic groups join to provide a distinctive, authentic visitor experience.

It informs both visitors and hosts. Residents discover their own heritage by learning that things they take for granted may be interesting to outsiders. As local people develop pride and skill in showing off their locale, tourists get more out of their visit.

It benefits residents economically. Travel businesses hire local workers, and use local services, products, and supplies. When community members understand the benefits of geotourism, they take responsibility for destination stewardship.

It supports integrity of place. Destination-savvy travelers seek out businesses that emphasize the character of the locale. In return, local stakeholders who receive economic benefits appreciate and protect the value of those assets.

It means great trips. Enthusiastic visitors bring home new knowledge. Their stories encourage friends and relatives to experience the same thing, which brings continuing business for the destination.

As a concept, geotourism has a lot to offer the Lowcountry. What the Lowcountry must offer in return is what National Geographic calls "enlightened destination stewardship." In other words, we've gotta take care of this place we call the L