

# Warming the Welcome

UNIQUE TOURISM PROGRAMS AIM TO ATTRACT TRAVELERS TO THE SOUTHEAST. *by Lindsey Lowe*

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hen Patrick Brian Miller was 12 years old, he visited Williamsburg, Va., and bought a novel that told the story of an archaeologist who traveled back to the Colonial era in Williamsburg. The novel, *Nicholson Street*, gave the town a whole new dimension for Miller, one that existed both in front of his eyes and on the pages of the book. It wasn't just a trip for him—it was an experience that gave him a taste of something, something that seemed a lot like magic.

In major tourist destinations, like Chicago, New York City or Los Angeles, enchantment twinkles under the bright lights and across Broadway stages. But there's a different kind of magic that dances in the humidity past the Mason-Dixon line, and more and more people are coming to find it. While rural Southeastern towns may not be the first must-sees on most people's travel lists, times are a changin'. The tourism industry is expanding quickly in the region, where, like Miller, travelers are discovering places that reward those who knock on their doors with overflowing charm and character, a glass of almost-too-sweet tea, and something worth writing home about.

## STORIES OF THE SOUTH

Miller never forgot his epiphany in Williamsburg, though he may not have called it that at the time. Then, when he was 15 years old, he visited Cahawba, the first capital of Alabama. At one time a thriving antebellum river town, it transitioned to a ghost town shortly after the Civil War. "The quiet mystery of those ruins seeped into my soul," he said.

In 2009, he completed a short story born from that visit called "The Last Confession," set in Cahawba, with a plot that gives a scary twist to the historic site. Miller thought that readers might like the chance to find out more about the setting, and perhaps visit there, so he suggested to his publisher that they develop an online tourism guide with websites that showcase the real town, where today historians and archaeologists are working to uncover its past and create an interpretive park.

It seemed that people did want to see the story's town—that first guide garnered a good bit of media coverage—and Miller thought he might be on to something. Since nothing else like it already existed, he founded the Southeastern

*St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Cahawba, Ala., was built in 1854, during the city's antebellum boom years.*



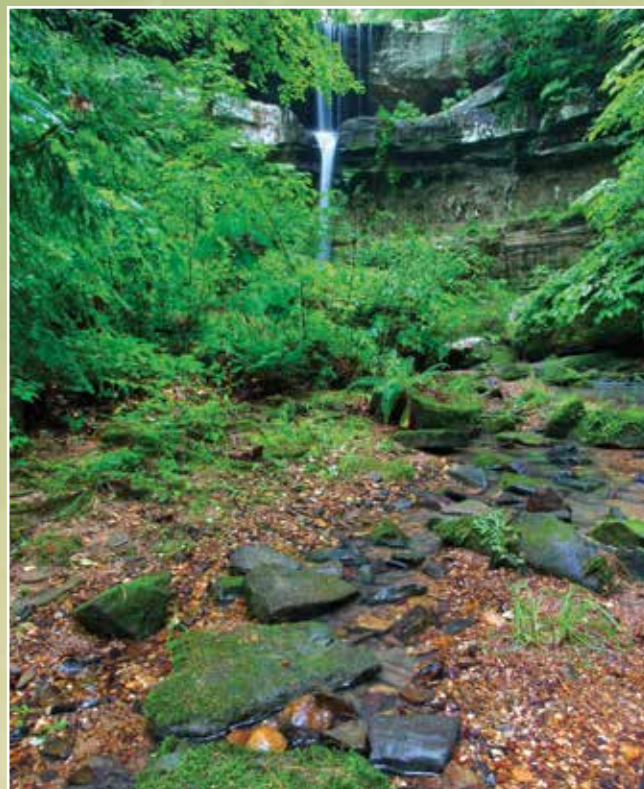
Literary Tourism Initiative (SELTi) to give those who enjoy literature the opportunity to find out more about the Southeastern spots they read about, and a way to breathe the air there for themselves.

Through SELTi, Miller develops online guides to accompany various books, directing readers to websites about the place or places they just experienced in fiction. Authors can, in turn, link to those on their blogs and websites. And so far, two novels with guides actually printed inside have been published by SELTi—*Blind Fate*, written by Miller, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise: Interactive Tourism Edition*. As more and more readers switch to portable devices like Kindles, the economic impact of having tourism guides included in e-books will become increasingly important, said Miller. Readers can simply click the links at the end to learn more about the locations, and some may follow up with an in-person visit. "If readers connect emotion-

ally with characters in a story, then they are also likely to connect emotionally with the places where that story takes place," he reasoned.

Not only does SELTi promote the real places where stories are set, but it also encourages authors to write novels set in real places, a genre Miller calls tourism fiction. Remembering his visit to Cahawba, he said, "These are intriguing experiences, and I would like to inspire other writers to generate those types of experiences in many attractions around the South." Cities and states can do their parts by attracting authors to visit and write about them, he added.

One way SELTi assists in this inspiration is by sponsoring writing contests for tourism fiction. Last year's inaugural competition, judged in part by The University of Alabama's Creative Campus (a student-centered arts advocacy program), challenged writers to promote UA Museums' Moundville Archaeological Park. The winner was Kathryn Lang, whose short story "Digging Up Bones" followed the solving of a murder mystery through discoveries at a dig at the historic park.



Above, moss-covered boulders decorate a waterfall in the deep forests of northern Alabama. Left, taking in the views on one of Alabama's birding trails, developed in part by the UA Center for Economic Development

This year's contest was co-sponsored by *Lookout Alabama* magazine, and solicited fictional works set in the Lookout Mountain region. The winner, announced in May, was Natalie Cone, with her short story "The Totem," about a scarred war veteran who buys a magical book written by a Cherokee chief, which transforms him back into a 10-year-old boy. Cone's entry will be published in the first issue of *Lookout Alabama*, due out in summer 2013, and both contest winners are part of an archive available on SELTi's website at [southeasternliterarytourisminitiative.blogspot.com](http://southeasternliterarytourisminitiative.blogspot.com).

While SELTi is a strategy for economic development, it also opens the

door for deeper enjoyment of a literary work, Miller said. "For example, suppose a fictional character proposed marriage in a very romantic, real place. Wouldn't many readers want to visit that place and perhaps even make a real proposal in that very beautiful spot from the novel they both read?" he asked. "These are the types of things that readers could do when inspired by tourism fiction."

Miller said it's an entirely new way to tap into the tourism industry while exposing people from all over the country to the historical and cultural richness of the Southeast. "Factor in that consumer spending accounts for 70 percent of our constantly struggling economy, and that means that tourism fiction—if developed to its fullest potential—could literally turn the economy around," he said.

Since its inception in 2009, SELTi has created tourism guides for 26 books and stories. The concept is, as Miller explained, still too new to gauge its success, but he believes it has the possibility to change the face of tourism, especially if other regions in the United States and other countries adopt the model.

While that may be a long way off,



Descriptive signs give details about Old Cahawba.

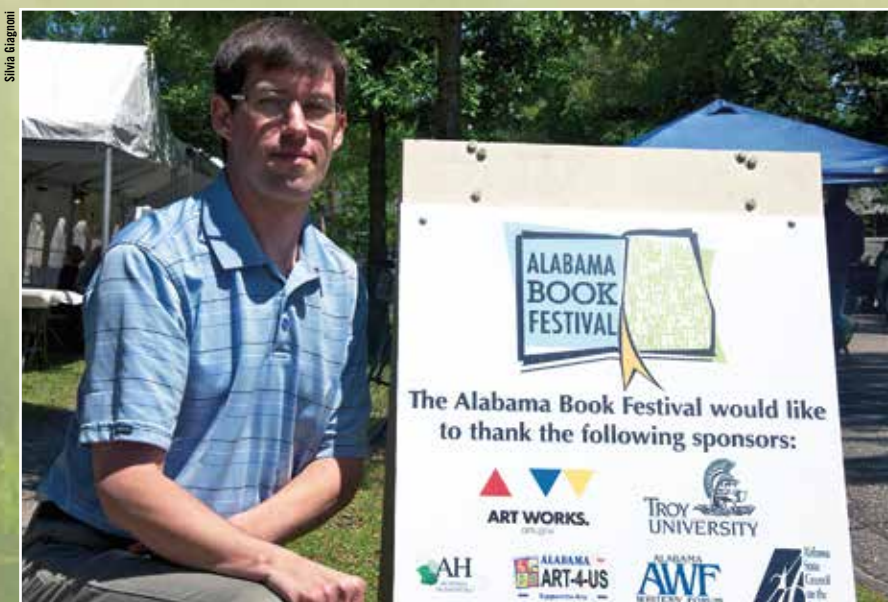
Kathryn Lang won SELTi's first short story contest. Brian Miller (below) encourages authors to write novels set in real places.

the idea is certainly making headway. The Alabama Senate introduced the nation's first state legislative resolution inviting authors to write about state tourism attractions; it was co-sponsored by all state senators. In April 2013, it was passed by the full House and was on its way to the governor. If it passes, Miller believes it could spark legislation on

## HIDDEN JEWELS

Kimberly Boyle, an assistant professor in the restaurant, hotels and meeting management (RHM) program at UA, believes, like Miller, in the power of the stories we find on our journeys. "I will always love the travel and tourism industry," she said. "Every town has a story." Boyle, a self-professed "Army brat," grew up traveling as her father relocated for his military career, and she said that through her childhood experiences, she fell in love with the adventure of it.

She received both her bachelor's and her master's from the Capstone, in 1996 and 1997 respectively, and jumped into a teaching career at the age of 23. Since then, she has played a significant role in transforming UA's RHM program, part of the College of Human Environmental Sciences. Alongside other faculty members, Boyle has contributed to growing it from 100 students in the 1990s to some 500 today. And students are learning, via hands-on experiences, the unique qualities of the hospitality industry, which is indelibly linked







RHM students Morgan Colburn and Kristin Nutter at Resort Quest in Destin, Fla.

Kimberly Boyle with recent graduates



with tourism, Boyle noted. “The tourism industry is dependent on hotels and restaurants, and hotels and restaurants are dependent on the tourism industry,” she said. “You can’t have one without the other.”

Along with her passion for place is one that stirs for the towns she calls “hidden jewels” in the Southeast. “My hope for the Southeast is that we continue to revitalize our cities and show the other parts of the nation and world the beauty, history, culture and adventure we offer,” Boyle said. It’s this vision that inspires her and her students to delve into harnessing and showcasing the beauty around them—even in Tuscaloosa, a town they know through and through. They are currently blending their courses with practical experience at the University Club, a historic landmark near campus, recently acquired by the college, that offers private dining and hosts events.

Boyle also pointed out that the development of a city’s tourism industry contributes immensely to its vibrancy. “Tourism is vital to the economic development of our communities,” she said. “Travelers to any destination bring money and jobs. Travel continues to

grow due to an increase in technology, disposable income, flexible job schedules and population growth, which is why the Southeast needs to continue to market its destinations more than ever.”

She not only sees the potential for growth in Southeastern tourism, but is committed to guiding the future leaders in the industry, who will help make it happen. Her fervor for her work is obvious, and is why she was named to the first class of the Atlanta-based Southeastern Tourism Society’s “Forty for the Future” in 2012.

She said that she hopes to continue developing the RHM program so that it ranks among the top in the country and offers even more hands-on experiences for students. Moreover, she is eager to continue watching her students dive into their profession, promoting the hospitality of the nation’s Southeast.

## A BETTER PLACE

If Boyle is teaching future leaders of the tourism industry, then Nisa Miranda is guiding those already immersed in the field. Miranda is director of UA’s Center for Economic Development

(UACED), located in downtown Tuscaloosa. The UACED serves a plethora of purposes, from training community leaders to developing plans for city revitalization, primarily focusing on financially distressed areas in Alabama.

The center has been involved in tourism development for the past seven or eight years, and in that time, the staff has devised a process for harnessing a given community’s assets and strengthening its weak points, Miranda said. They begin by identifying and building a team—a combination of UACED staff and community leaders. Then, they develop a plan based on each community’s specific assets, needs and goals, and over the course of 18 months, they set a program in place for long-term tourism vitality.

That change takes a lot of “rolling your sleeves up and working at it,” Miranda said, and it is not without its challenges. “The most difficult part of this work is to convince the local elected officials to commit to investing in amenities in order to make their community distinctive, attractive and competitive,” she explained. “Elected officials understand brick and mortar infrastructure. They find it harder to understand the need for aesthetics and designed amenities. But we’re slowly making progress.”

The UACED is currently put-

ting its strategy in motion in 11 counties in southwest Alabama, eight counties in east Alabama and with the Cahaba Blueway project (a joint effort to improve access along the more than 190-mile stretch of the Cahaba River, promoting education, recreation and conservation). Each of these has experienced marked growth, Miranda reported.

“Our work is rewarding and effective on many levels,” she said, noting that an official Southwest Alabama Tourism Office has been established in the area where they have worked the longest. This 11-county region, nestled in the Blackbelt, also has a strong Tourism Partners group, which includes chambers of commerce, museums, historic sites, libraries and others. “This year, we will be working on branding, which will lead to advertising and more exposure in other forms of media,” she added.

Miranda explained that much of the success of the tourism industry is the result of unity throughout the state, and this is something she desires to see more of in Alabama. “Tourism is an area in which communities can collaborate to set grander goals and reap bigger economic rewards,” she pointed out. “So our goals in this regard are to build several

regional groups around the state, and help those regions reach their full potential.”

A milestone achievement for the southwestern region has been the creation of Blackbelt Treasures, an arts collaborative based in Camden, Ala., that represents more than 350 artists in 19 counties, and can be found online at [blackbelttreasures.com](http://blackbelttreasures.com).



Blackbelt Treasures, an arts collaborative, represents more than 350 artists.

work.” Home to nearly 400 species of birds, Alabama boasts one of the most diverse avian habitats in the Southeast, and Miranda said a future goal is to extend the trails into a statewide project. More information is available at [alabamabirdingtrails.com](http://alabamabirdingtrails.com).

Miranda said the UACED will continue boosting the state’s tourism potential by effectively harnessing its assets, creating an atmosphere that welcomes visi-

tors. “I’d like to see Alabama embrace its unique characteristics, protect and enhance those, and cling to its authenticity,” she said. Originally from Brazil, Miranda previously worked in the trade industry, which took her to places all around the world; but it’s Alabama that has captured her heart. “Looking at Alabama critically, I was able to see its great potential, and the areas where communities and citizens hold themselves back,” she said. “I consider myself on a journey—a mission to make this state a better place.”

With the help of Miranda and others like her, countless visitors are discovering the magic of the Southland, from capital ruins that inspire stories to birding trails that sing diversity. And while there may not be quite as many honking taxis in Tuscaloosa as there are in New York City, there is still an awful lot of sweet tea. ■

Other UACED landmark projects are four birding trails that launched in fall 2012, developed along with the Alabama Tourism Department and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The trails, located in the Appalachian Highlands, the Piedmont, west Alabama and the Wiregrass area, offer 25 to 32 sites per trail, drawing in birdwatchers from around the country. The expansive project included the organization of a region-

al leadership group, content for a website and iPhone application, and interpretive and way-finding signage, which Miranda called “a lot of exciting and productive



Nisa Miranda in her downtown office, and left, a quilting demonstration

