



Southwest Illinois Is Ready To Shine In 2023

by Stephanie Tate
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ALTON - With tourism on the rebound in southwest Illinois, it is now time for the region to shine in 2023, Cory Jobe, President/CEO of the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau announced at the bureau's annual Tourism Summit held today at the Gateway Convention Center in Collinsville.

Speaking to a sold-out venue of over 370 attendees, Jobe noted that while 2022 saw an increase in travelers and traveler spending in the region, the addition of new tourism products and strong destination marketing will be key to growth in 2023.

The Bureau also presented a series of awards to businesses in Collinsville, Edwardsville, Alton and Grafton as well as former State Senator Rachelle Crowe and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“Why does tourism matter?” Jobe said during his presentation. “Our regional economy depends on tourism – it means thousands of jobs for our residents, millions in economic activity for businesses and millions more in local taxes to our communities. Tourism benefits everyone in southwest Illinois.”

He backed those comments up with facts provided by the Illinois Office of Tourism. Visitor spending improved in 2021 (the most recent year of economic data) to near pre-pandemic levels. The region saw visitor spending of \$700 million with the largest increase in spending occurring in Jersey County driven by activity at Pere Marquette State Park and Grafton.

In 2022, the six-county region saw hotel occupancy increase 5.1%, hotel revenue was up 5% and the average daily rate was up 11.3%.

Jobe noted much of the increase was due to strong marketing efforts utilizing video, digital ads, print and paid social. He also pointed to an enhanced sports tourism, outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism efforts as another reason why tourism has strengthened in the region.

The Bureau has already unveiled a new video docu-series in 2023 called “Heartbeats” which takes a deeper look into the passionate people who pour their hearts and souls in to making southwest Illinois a great place to call home. The bureau will expand its video efforts this year with a planned TV channel called [riversandroutes.tv](https://www.riversandroutes.tv) which will debut later this year. A new podcast series is also on tap. The region will see the opening of the new West End Station in Edwardsville as a Route 66 museum and visitor center. The revitalized Cannonball Jail in Carlinville is also expected to open in 2023 – again adding Route 66 products to the Last 100 Miles of Route 66.

In addition to the highlights of the visitor economy, the Bureau honored three businesses who were inducted in to the 2022 class of Illinois Makers: Old Herald Brewery & Distillery in Collinsville; Aria’s Cookies and Confections in East Alton; and Three Rivers Community Farm in rural Elsah.

Businesses, organizations and individuals who have made a difference throughout the region with new product, events and businesses were also presented with awards.

Honored at the event were:

- **New Attraction:** Aerie's Resort in Grafton for the new Aerie's Alpine Coaster. It is the first alpine coaster in Illinois featuring 4,000 feet of track with seven hair pin turns and eight waves and twistlers.
- **Partner of the Year:** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the organization's leadership in providing high quality outdoor and water-based recreation experiences.
- **Friend of Tourism:** Former Illinois State Senator Rachelle Crowe who was a champion of the hospitality and tourism industry during her tenure in the state legislature leading efforts for the Bureau to receive a \$10 Million Capital Grant.
- **New Start Up:** FLOCK Food Truck Park in Alton and Matt and Laura Windisch for creating a friendly food truck park in Alton where friends and family come together for amazing food and craft cocktails.
- **New Venue:** Herald Square in Collinsville a new outdoor entertainment venue adjacent to Old Herald Brewery & Distillery which has become a gathering place for the community of Collinsville.
- **New Festival or Event:** 'Cue & Brew Festival in Edwardsville which is a pro and backyard BBQ competition paired with local beer with proceeds from the event benefiting the Edwardsville Community Foundation.