



# Visit Smokies Motorcoach Add-On Pilot

A low-commitment test that connects established regional tours with group-ready Southern Smokies experiences.

PARTNER DISCUSSION | JULY 2026

Six-month pilot • 12–24 month sales-to-arrival horizon



# Start with existing tours, not a full sales operation

## RECOMMENDATION

**Approve a six-month Phase Zero pilot that offers easy Southern Smokies additions to routes operators already sell.**

### COMMITMENT

**Limited**

### PILOT WINDOW

**6 months**

### INITIAL FOCUS

**Pipeline proof**

**No multi-year county MOU, national trade-show commitment, organized FAM tour, or full booking operation is required for this test.**

# Nearby anchors already bring groups within reach

## TOURS OPERATORS ALREADY SELL

- Cherokee
- Great Smoky Mountains Railroad
- Asheville and Biltmore
- Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge
- Blue Ridge and Helen
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park

## THE EASIER SALES ASK

**“You are already nearby. Add a group-ready meal, attraction, shopping stop, cultural experience, or overnight.”**

**Smaller request  
Lower operator risk  
Faster route fit**

# Industry guidance supports flexible add-ons and lesser-known stops

Tour operators are actively looking for flexibility, authentic experiences, shorter tours, and destinations beyond the usual favorites.

## 53%

of surveyed operators cited demand for more personalized and flexible itineraries.

## 55%

said heritage and history is receiving more time and investment than any other tour theme measured.

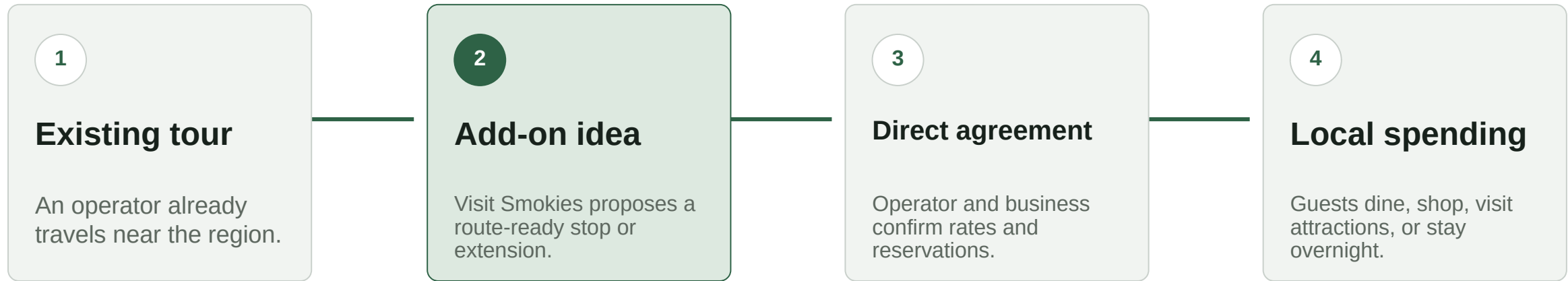
## ADD-ONS

ABA guidance tells DMOs to connect itineraries to major routes, attractions, cities, side trips, parking, and road conditions.

**This does not guarantee bookings. It provides a credible basis for a limited regional test.**

# The pilot inserts value into a route that already exists

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**Visit Smokies is the connector and information source, not the tour operator or booking company.**

# Six months creates a sales kit and qualified pipeline

4  
core outputs

- |    |                                    |                                                                                     |
|----|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01 | <b>Operator target list</b>        | 25–40 operators already selling nearby routes or regional tours.                    |
| 02 | <b>Motorcoach-ready directory</b>  | 15–20 dependable partners with capacity, access, rates, and contacts.               |
| 03 | <b>Flexible add-on experiences</b> | Three to five modules built as 90-minute, half-day, full-day, or overnight options. |
| 04 | <b>Simple sales materials</b>      | Landing page, regional overview, experience sheets, directory, and request form.    |

# Initial concepts connect culture, scenery, shopping, and food

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## 01 Cherokee + Bryson City

Culture, group dining, downtown time, and a rail connection.

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## 02 Nantahala Gorge

Scenic outdoor access, regional shopping, and group dining.

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## 03 Mountain Arts + Heritage

Craft demonstrations, cultural attractions, and a group-friendly meal.

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## 04 Waynesville + Maggie Valley

Walkable downtown, local food, heritage, and mountain experiences.

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## 05 Andrews + Murphy

Heritage, local shopping, dining, and North Georgia or Tennessee connections.

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**Final concepts will be chosen only after coach access, parking, route safety, capacity, and operator interest are verified.**

# One experience can flex to four time windows

## EXAMPLE: MOUNTAIN ARTS + HERITAGE

Operators can choose the amount of time that fits the tour they already sell.

### 90 MIN

#### Focused stop

One signature attraction or demonstration.

### HALF DAY

#### Add a meal

Experience plus lunch and limited shopping.

### FULL DAY

#### Build a theme

Two experiences, dining, and free time.

### OVERNIGHT

#### Extend spending

Lodging, dinner, breakfast, and a morning stop.

Flexible modules reduce the amount of change an operator must make to an existing itinerary.

# Reliable partners make every itinerary coach-ready

REQUIRED INFORMATION

■ Coach access, parking, or drop-off

■ Group capacity and restroom access

■ Accessibility details

■ Group rates or meal options

■ Recommended visit length

■ Reservation lead time and policies

■ Named contact and two-day response

WHY OPERATORS NEED IT

Safe arrival and departure plan

Confident timing for 40+ guests

Accurate guest communication

Usable tour pricing

Route and driver-hour planning

Fewer last-minute surprises

Dependable sales follow-through

# Clear roles keep Visit Smokies out of tour operations

## VISIT SMOKIES

- Research existing operators and routes
- Develop suggested add-on experiences
- Maintain partner information
- Make direct introductions
- Track leads, feedback, and outcomes

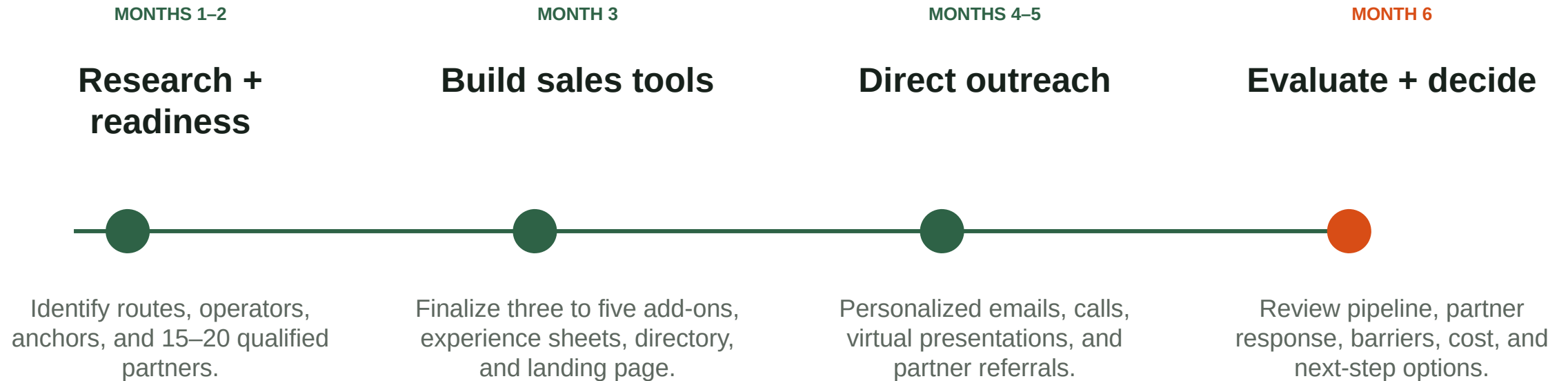
## PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES + OPERATORS

- Confirm rates, availability, and policies
- Make reservations and sign agreements
- Handle payments and passenger service
- Deliver the confirmed group experience
- Report referred visits back to Visit Smokies

## OUT OF SCOPE

Passenger payments • transportation contracts • reservations on behalf of operators • rate or availability guarantees • operating the tour

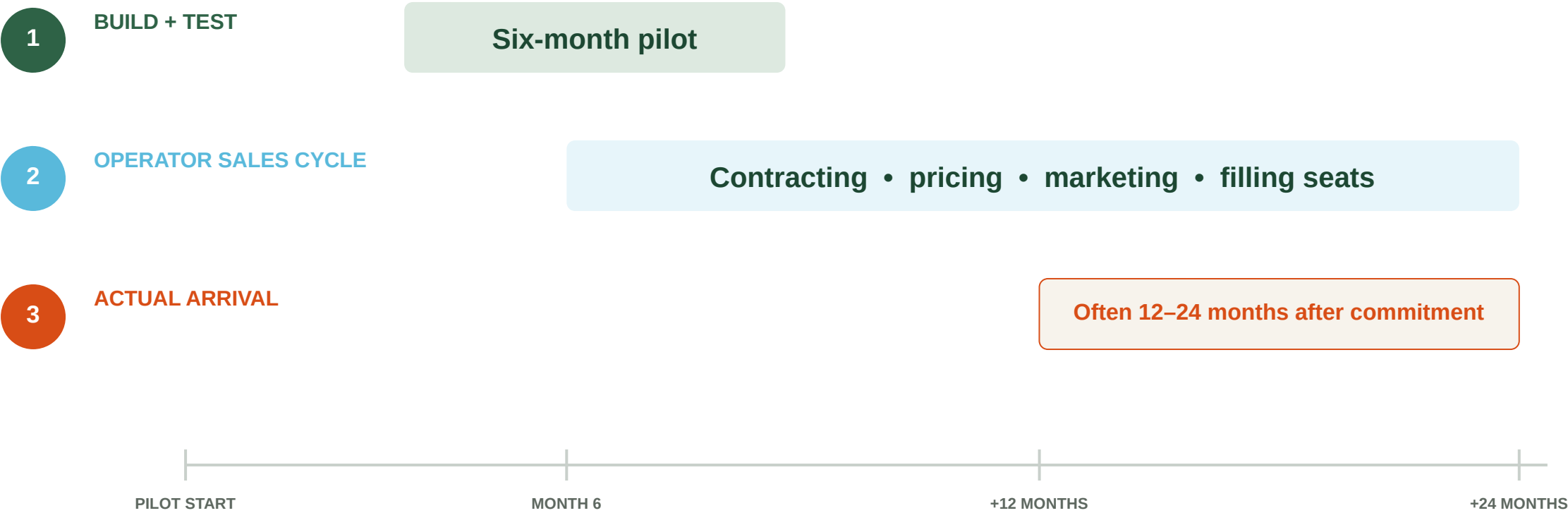
# The six-month pilot moves from readiness to outreach



**Month 6 is a go, adjust, or stop decision on continued sales activity. It is not the deadline for tours to arrive.**

# After an operator says yes, arrival may still take 12–24 months

The pilot must separate sales progress from arrival timing.



An early-arriving bus is a bonus, not the six-month proof requirement.

Planning assumption: Visit Smokies Regional Motorcoach Initiative, July 2026. ABA attraction guidance asks partners to provide schedules 12–18 months ahead.

# Success is measured first by pipeline, then by arrivals

## BY THE END OF MONTH 6

- 15–20 qualified regional businesses
- 3–5 marketable add-on experiences
- 25–40 qualified operators contacted
- 8–10 meaningful operator conversations
- 3–5 customized proposals or referrals
- Documented barriers, needs, and next actions

## TRACKED OVER THE FOLLOWING 12–24 MONTHS

- Itineraries placed into operator planning
- Confirmed departure dates
- Group stops and overnight stays
- Estimated visitors and room nights
- Partner revenue and visitor spending
- Repeat bookings and route expansion

**The pilot succeeds if it proves influence on an existing route and creates a credible path to future arrivals.**

# The pilot limits financial and staffing exposure

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**\$2,500–\$7,500**

estimated pilot budget

Design and printing  
Operator research and outreach  
Limited travel or meetings  
Contingency

**4–6 hours**

estimated staff time per week

Concentrated during partner screening, material development, personalized outreach, and follow-up.

**Funding can scale within this range. No pooled multi-year county contribution is required to begin.**

# The pilot exposes barriers before we scale

| RISK                              | PILOT GUARDRAIL                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Long sales cycle                  | Use pipeline milestones; track arrivals for 12–24 months after commitment.             |
| Mountain road limitations         | Verify route, vehicle length, turns, grades, parking, and turnaround before promotion. |
| Partner capacity or response gaps | Screen participants and require a dependable contact with timely follow-through.       |
| Rate or availability changes      | Operators and businesses confirm current terms directly; materials carry update dates. |
| Role creep                        | Use written boundaries: Visit Smokies connects, businesses and operators contract.     |

# Partners can help without a long-term commitment

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## WE ARE ASKING PARTNERS TO

- 1 Identify** group-ready businesses and experiences.
- 2 Share** knowledge of groups already visiting the community.
- 3 Verify** coach access, parking, route safety, restrooms, and capacity.
- 4 Participate** in a six-month test if readiness standards are met.
- 5 Report** referrals that lead to planning, booking, or arrival.

**NO COUNTY MOU  
REQUIRED FOR PILOT**

**NO GUARANTEE OF  
IMMEDIATE ARRIVALS**



# Decision requested

## Authorize a six-month Motorcoach Add-On Pilot as Phase Zero of the larger regional initiative.

- Confirm pilot budget and staff owner
- Invite communities to nominate ready partners
- Return at Month 3 with final modules and outreach list
- Return at Month 6 with a go, adjust, or stop recommendation

### THE DECISION TODAY

**Test the market with discipline before making a larger regional commitment.**

**Actual tours may arrive 12–24 months after an operator commits to or begins selling the itinerary.**

# Sources and planning assumptions

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## INDUSTRY SOURCES

- American Bus Association, On the Right Path for Groups: Checklist for DMOs/CVBs (2024).
- American Bus Association, Tips to Attract Group Sales: Checklist for Attractions (2024).
- American Bus Association, Smart Add-Ons for 2026 (2025).
- National Tour Association, Collaboration in Packaged Travel (2025).
- Visit North Carolina, Partner Programs and industry resources (accessed July 2026).

## VISIT SMOKIES PLANNING SOURCES

- Visit Smokies Regional Motorcoach Initiative, confidential draft for board review, July 2026.
- VisitSmokies.org regional itinerary and access content.
- Pilot estimates are planning ranges, not guaranteed costs, bookings, visitor counts, or economic impact.
- Lead-time assumption: tours may operate 12–24 months after an operator commits to or begins selling the itinerary.
- All routes, rates, availability, vehicle access, and partner readiness require verification before promotion.