VISIT SMOKIES

Regional Motorcoach Initiative

Luxury Group Travel Execution Plan for the Southern Smokies

Prepared for the Partner County Tourism Development Authorities

The Seven Westernmost Counties of North Carolina and the Qualla Boundary

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1. Executive Summary

One overnight motorcoach delivers forty to fifty visitors to a hotel lobby, a restaurant dining room, and a downtown shopping district in a single arrival. No other sales channel available to a small destination organization concentrates spending this efficiently.

Visit Smokies proposes a coordinated Regional Motorcoach Initiative that positions the seven westernmost counties of North Carolina and the Qualla Boundary as a three-to-seven-day luxury group travel destination. The program is not about attracting buses. It is about building a durable regional sales infrastructure that converts group travel demand into overnight stays, restaurant covers, attraction admissions, and retail sales across Western North Carolina.

The national market is substantial and recovering strongly. According to the American Bus Association Foundation's 2024 economic impact research, conducted by Tourism Economics, motorcoach group travelers spent $39.8 billion nationally in 2024, generating an $89.7 billion total economic impact and supporting more than 561,000 jobs. Food and beverage was the single largest beneficiary category at $13.2 billion, followed by retail at $7.5 billion and recreation at $7.2 billion. These are precisely the local business categories the Southern Smokies is built on.

The region already holds the assets luxury group operators buy: the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad in Bryson City, the Museum of the Cherokee People and living Cherokee culture on the Qualla Boundary, the John C. Campbell Folk School, the Nantahala Gorge, the Blue Ridge Parkway, waterfall corridors near Highlands and Franklin, and a growing base of boutique lodging, farm-to-table dining, and craft experiences. What the region lacks is a single, professional point of sale. This plan creates one.

Year One Targets at a Glance

Measure	Year One Target
Participating counties	7 counties plus the Qualla Boundary
Motorcoach-ready businesses enrolled	50
Confirmed tours booked	15
Estimated visitors	750
Hotel room nights	600

Measure	Year One Target
Estimated direct economic impact	$300,000+

The ask of each partner county is modest, an annual contribution of $2,500 to $10,000 plus a designated liaison. In return, counties gain access to national group travel trade shows, professionally built itineraries, familiarization tours, and a coordinated sales pipeline no single county could fund alone.

2. The Market Opportunity

2.1 The National Group Travel Market

Motorcoach group travel is one of the healthiest segments in domestic tourism. The ABA Foundation's research shows group travelers logged 14.9 billion passenger miles in 2024, and the industry's own trade data shows new coach sales exceeding 2,000 units for two consecutive years, a signal that operators are investing in capacity. Group tours skew toward travelers 55 and older with disposable income, flexible schedules, and a strong preference for shoulder-season and midweek travel. That profile fills exactly the occupancy gaps Southern Smokies lodging partners struggle with outside of summer weekends and October.

2.2 Why the Southern Smokies Wins

- The Great Smoky Mountains Railroad is a proven group anchor that operators already know, giving the region a recognizable hook to build multi-day itineraries around.
- Cherokee culture on the Qualla Boundary offers an authentic Indigenous tourism experience that few competing regions can match, and Indigenous tourism is an active growth priority within ABA's own partnership work.
- The Blue Ridge Parkway, Nantahala Gorge, and waterfall corridors near Highlands, Franklin, and Cashiers deliver the scenic payoff that fall color and spring bloom tours are sold on.
- Drive-market geography is ideal: the region sits within a day's coach drive of Atlanta, Charlotte, Knoxville, Greenville, Nashville, and Birmingham, the exact origin markets where Southeast tour operators are based.
- Small-town character is a selling point, not a weakness. ABA's research specifically highlights how group tours push visitor spending into small towns and gateway communities.

2.3 The Economics of a Single Coach

The business case rests on simple per-coach math. Using conservative assumptions drawn from the Year One targets in this plan:

Assumption	Value
Passengers per coach	45 to 50
Average stay	2 to 3 nights
Room nights per tour (double occupancy)	40 to 75
Estimated direct spend per tour	$18,000 to $22,000
Spend categories	Lodging, dining, admissions, retail, driver and escort services

Fifteen confirmed tours in Year One at roughly $20,000 in direct spend per tour supports the $300,000 economic impact target. At the three-year target of 50 to 75 annual arrivals, direct visitor spending exceeds $1 million per year, before counting repeat visitation, extended stays, and the individual return trips that group travel reliably seeds.

2.4 A Note on Booking Lead Times

Group tour operators plan 12 to 24 months ahead. Itineraries sold at a January trade show typically operate the following fall at the earliest, and often the year after. This plan's timeline reflects that reality: Year One is measured by pipeline built (operator contacts, itineraries placed, FAM attendance), while confirmed arrivals compound in Years Two and Three. Partner boards should set expectations accordingly.

3. Program Structure and Governance

3.1 Visit Smokies as Lead Agency

Visit Smokies serves as the single regional sales organization and the sole point of contact for tour operators. Fragmented county-by-county outreach confuses operators and wastes trade show spend. Consolidating the sales function is the core structural decision of this plan.

Visit Smokies responsibilities:

- Develop and maintain the annual regional motorcoach strategy and sales plan.

- Create and manage the branded Motorcoach Program identity, collateral, and Group Travel webpage.
- Serve as primary contact for tour operators, receptive operators, and group leaders.
- Build, price, and maintain the regional itinerary library.
- Coordinate counties, attractions, hotels, and restaurants into bookable products.
- Represent the region at group travel trade shows and sales missions.
- Host familiarization tours and track every lead from inquiry through arrival.
- Report performance quarterly to participating TDAs.

3.2 Participating County TDAs

Each participating county commits three forms of support.

Financial Support

An annual contribution of $2,500 to $10,000 per county, scaled to county budget size, pooled to fund trade show registration and booths, FAM tour hosting, printed sales materials, sales missions, and program marketing. Section 11 details the budget framework.

Operational Support

- Designate one county liaison as the single local coordination contact.
- Recruit motorcoach-ready hotels, restaurants, attractions, and shops.
- Identify coach parking, turnarounds, restroom stops, and welcome opportunities.

Marketing Support

- Provide current photography, video, logos, event calendars, and seasonal promotions for use in regional sales materials.

3.3 Local Business Partners

Businesses join the program by meeting a published readiness standard. Standards keep the operator experience consistent across the region.

Partner Type	Minimum Commitments
Hotels	Group rates and room blocks; coach parking; luggage assistance; flexible check-in; a named group sales contact
Restaurants	Group menus at set price points; service for 40+ within one hour; bus parking or drop-off; pre-order options; complimentary driver and escort meals

Partner Type	Minimum Commitments
Attractions	Reserved entry times; group pricing; restroom capacity; accessible entrances; a named group contact
Retail and shops	Ability to welcome 40 shoppers at once; group discounts or gift bags; local and regional products

Industry practice note: complimentary driver and escort meals, comp driver hotel rooms, and reserved coach parking are standard operator expectations, not perks. Businesses that meet them get rebooked; businesses that do not get quietly dropped from itineraries.

4. Phase One: Build the Foundation (Days 1 to 60)

Phase One establishes the program's identity, tools, and partner commitments before any external sales activity begins.

4.1 Deliverables

Deliverable	Description	Owner
Motorcoach Sales Guide	Professional profile of the region for operators: itineraries, capacities, parking, contacts, seasonal calendar	Visit Smokies
Regional itinerary book	Ten themed, priced, day-by-day itineraries (Section 6)	Visit Smokies
Operator database	150+ qualified tour operators, receptives, and group leaders in a CRM with contact history	Visit Smokies
Group Travel webpage	Dedicated landing page on visitsmokies.org with itineraries, RFP form, and asset downloads	Visit Smokies
Group Travel packet	Print and digital packet for trade shows and sales calls	Visit Smokies
Signed MOUs	Executed agreements with each county TDA (Section 12)	Visit Smokies + TDAs
County liaison roster	One named liaison per county with backup contact	County TDAs

4.2 Sixty-Day Timeline

Weeks	Milestones
Weeks 1-2	Present plan to county TDA boards; circulate MOU for signature; open program budget account
Weeks 3-4	Confirm liaisons; launch business recruitment in each county; begin operator database build
Weeks 5-6	Draft Sales Guide and first five itineraries; collect county photo and video assets
Weeks 7-8	Launch Group Travel webpage; finalize trade show calendar and registrations; complete Sales Guide

5. Phase Two: Motorcoach Readiness Audit (Days 30 to 90)

Every county completes a standardized Motorcoach Readiness Audit before its businesses appear in sold itineraries. The audit protects the region's reputation: one failed lunch stop for 50 guests can cost an operator relationship worth years of bookings. Audits run concurrently with Phase One and are compiled into a regional capacity report.

5.1 Lodging Audit

- Which properties accept groups, and at what room-block sizes: 20, 40, or 60 rooms?
- Which properties fit a luxury positioning: boutique inns, historic hotels, lodge properties?
- Coach parking on site or nearby? Luggage handling? Comp driver room policy?

5.2 Dining Audit

- Which restaurants can seat and serve 40, 60, or 100 guests within one hour?
- Group menu options at two or three fixed price points, with dietary accommodations.
- Bus parking or a workable drop-off and pickup plan.

5.3 Attractions Audit

- Which attractions already accept groups, and which need reservations, timed entry, or operational improvements?
- Restroom capacity, accessible entrances and pathways, and indoor rain options.

5.4 Transportation and Infrastructure Audit

- Inventory coach parking, turnaround space, loading zones, fuel stops, rest areas, public restrooms, and driver-friendly hotels in each county.
- Flag mountain road segments with length, weight, or seasonal restrictions that affect 45-foot coaches, and document approved routings. This is a real constraint in this region and operators will ask.

5.5 Shopping Audit

- Which downtowns and shops can absorb 40 shoppers arriving together, and which will offer group incentives, gift bags, or demonstrations?

Output: a county-by-county capacity matrix that determines which itineraries each county can support today and what infrastructure gaps (chiefly parking and large-group dining) need local investment.

6. Phase Three: Signature Itineraries

Luxury operators buy experiences, not destinations. Every itinerary below is themed, day-structured, and built to spread spending across multiple counties. Each will be fully priced with net group rates before it is presented to operators.

6.1 Heritage of the Smokies (3 days)

- **Day 1:** Cherokee culture: Museum of the Cherokee People, Oconaluftee Indian Village, and Native-owned dining on the Qualla Boundary.
- **Day 2:** Great Smoky Mountains Railroad excursion from Bryson City, with downtown time and dinner.
- **Day 3:** John C. Campbell Folk School craft demonstrations, historic inn lunch, and live mountain music send-off.

6.2 Luxury Mountain Escape (3-4 days)

- Boutique and historic lodging, spa time, wine and fine dining in Highlands and Cashiers, scenic drives, and an easy waterfall walk. Built for premium per-person pricing and shoulder-season departures.

6.3 Rails, Rivers and Heritage (4 days)

- Railroad excursion, a gentle guided river experience in the Nantahala Gorge, historic downtowns in Sylva, Waynesville, and Bryson City, craft demonstrations, and a farm dinner.

6.4 Blue Ridge Culinary Tour (3-4 days)

- Farm-to-table dinners, legal moonshine and craft distillery tastings, breweries, chef demonstrations, tailgate markets, and food heritage storytelling across at least three counties.

6.5 Fall Color Spectacular (3-5 days)

- Blue Ridge Parkway overlooks near Waterrock Knob, waterfall stops, elk viewing in the Cataloochee and Oconaluftee valleys, dedicated photography time, and luxury lodging. This is the region's highest-demand product and should anchor the first trade show pitch.

6.6 Itinerary Development Standards

- Every itinerary names specific businesses, arrival times, and coach logistics, and carries confirmed net group pricing valid for 18 months.
- Pacing follows group travel norms: no more than one early morning, restroom stops every two hours, and daily free time.
- Each itinerary touches a minimum of three counties so program benefits spread across all partners.
- Five additional itineraries (garden and bloom, photography, faith-based, student, and holiday themes) will be developed by end of Year One to reach the ten-itinerary target.

7. Phase Four: Sales Strategy

7.1 Priority Origin Markets

Tier	Markets	Rationale
Primary	Atlanta, Charlotte, Knoxville, Greenville, Birmingham, Nashville, Jacksonville, South Florida	One-day coach drive; dense concentration of Southeast tour operators and group leaders
Secondary	Midwest, Northeast, Ontario (Canada)	Established fall color and Appalachian heritage demand; longer stays of 5 to 7 nights

7.2 Target Organizations and Channels

- American Bus Association (ABA) and its annual Marketplace, held each January, the industry's primary appointment-based selling event.
- National Tour Association (NTA) Travel Exchange.

- Travel South USA Domestic Showcase and the Southeast Tourism Society, the strongest regional channels for Southeast-based operators.
- Ontario Motor Coach Association for Canadian fall color business.
- Group Travel Leader and affinity channels: senior travel clubs, church and faith-based travel planners, garden clubs, photography clubs, alumni associations, and educational travel planners.
- Receptive tour operators who package the Southeast for international markets.

7.3 Sales Cadence

Activity	Frequency	Notes
Trade shows attended	3 per year minimum	Book ABA Marketplace and Travel South appointments months in advance; appointments are requested, not walk-up
Sales missions to origin markets	2 per year	Atlanta and Charlotte first; pair with operator office visits
Operator outreach touches	150 operators contacted in Year One	Tracked in CRM from first touch through booking
Operator e-newsletter	Quarterly	New itineraries, seasonal windows, featured partners
RFP response standard	48-hour first response	Speed is a competitive weapon for a small DMO

8. Phase Five: Marketing and Collateral

8.1 Visit Smokies Produces

- Digital sales kit: itineraries, pricing sheets, regional map, coach logistics guide, and image library, packaged for operator download.
- Short operator-facing videos for the top three itineraries, built from real regional photography and footage, consistent with the Visit Smokies visual standard of authentic imagery over stock-photo polish.
- Quarterly operator newsletter and the Group Travel webpage.
- Trade show booth assets and printed Sales Guide.

8.2 Counties Provide

- Event calendars, seasonal promotions, group discounts, new experience announcements, and current photo and video assets on a quarterly refresh schedule.

8.3 Businesses Provide

- Current group pricing and availability, menus, photos, a named group contact, and a documented reservation process, updated at minimum annually and confirmed before each selling season.

9. Phase Six: Familiarization Tours

FAM tours are the program's single highest-converting investment. Operators do not sell what they have not experienced. Two FAMs are planned in Year One: one timed to fall color and one in late spring, each hosting 8 to 12 qualified guests including tour operators, receptive operators, group leaders, and one or two group travel journalists.

9.1 Sample Three-Day FAM Schedule

Day	Program
Day One	Arrivals; welcome reception at a historic hotel; partner introductions; regional dinner
Day Two	Blue Ridge Parkway scenic drive; Great Smoky Mountains Railroad excursion; group-service lunch; Museum of the Cherokee People; downtown shopping time; farm dinner
Day Three	Soft adventure or waterfall stop; craft demonstration; itinerary and pricing review session; departures

9.2 FAM Standards

- Every FAM guest is qualified in advance: they must plan or buy group tours, not simply enjoy travel.
- Partners host at no or reduced cost; the pooled budget covers transportation, gifts, and gaps.
- Every FAM ends with a structured selling session and a 30-day follow-up plan for each guest.
- Success measure: at least one confirmed booking per FAM within 12 months.

10. Phase Seven: Booking Process

Visit Smokies remains the single point of contact from first inquiry through arrival day. The workflow below keeps operators out of the weeds and keeps every partner accountable to confirmed details.

Step	Action	Responsible
1	Operator inquiry or RFP received; logged in CRM within 24 hours	Visit Smokies
2	Draft itinerary and pricing returned within one week	Visit Smokies
3	County liaison confirms local logistics: parking, timing, welcome	County Coordinator
4	Hotels confirm room blocks and rates in writing	Hotels
5	Restaurants confirm menus, pricing, and seating times	Restaurants
6	Attractions confirm reserved entry and group pricing	Attractions
7	Final itinerary compiled and sent for operator approval	Visit Smokies
8	Confirmation packet issued; arrival details distributed to all partners	Visit Smokies
9	Arrival, welcome, and post-tour follow-up survey	All partners

11. Year One Budget Framework

The program pools county contributions into a dedicated regional fund administered by Visit Smokies with quarterly reporting. The framework below assumes a mid-range pool of roughly $45,000 from seven counties; final figures adjust with actual commitments.

Category	Estimate	Notes
Trade shows (3): registration, booth, travel	$15,000	ABA Marketplace, Travel South, NTA or STS
FAM tours (2)	$10,000	Offset by partner in-kind hosting
Sales collateral: Sales Guide, itinerary book, packet	$7,000	Design and print
Group Travel webpage and digital sales kit	$5,000	Build within existing site
Sales missions (2) and operator outreach	$4,000	Atlanta, Charlotte
Video and photography for operator marketing	$3,000	Supplements existing asset library

Category	Estimate	Notes
Contingency	$1,000	
Total	$45,000	Funded by pooled county contributions of $2,500-$10,000 each

Staffing note: Year One is manageable within existing Visit Smokies capacity if group travel is formally assigned as a defined role (roughly a half-time responsibility across sales, itinerary building, and coordination). If the pipeline performs to target, a dedicated Group Sales Manager position should be budgeted for Year Two or Three, funded in part by program growth.

12. Memorandum of Understanding

12.1 Visit Smokies Commits To

- Develop and execute the annual regional motorcoach strategy.
- Attend a minimum of two group travel trade shows each year, with a target of three.
- Create, price, and maintain the regional itinerary library.
- Serve as the primary sales representative and single operator contact for all participating counties.
- Coordinate and host familiarization tours.
- Produce annual marketing collateral and maintain the dedicated Group Travel webpage.
- Track inquiries, bookings, room nights, and economic impact in a shared reporting format.
- Provide quarterly performance reports to participating TDAs.

12.2 Each Participating County TDA Commits To

- Contribute annual funding within the agreed range toward the regional initiative.
- Designate one county liaison with decision authority for local logistics.
- Recruit and maintain a current roster of motorcoach-ready businesses.
- Assist with FAM tour planning and hosting within the county.
- Provide updated marketing assets and event information quarterly.

- Support local logistics including coach parking solutions and visitor welcome services.
- Participate in quarterly regional planning meetings.

12.3 Each Participating Business Commits To

- Honor agreed group pricing and reservation procedures for the published validity period.
- Maintain current information on capacity, accessibility, and availability.
- Designate a named group sales contact and respond to itinerary requests within two business days.
- Deliver a consistent, high-quality guest experience for motorcoach groups, including standard driver and escort courtesies.

Term: two years initial, renewing annually thereafter, with a 90-day withdrawal provision. A two-year initial term is deliberate; group travel lead times mean one-year commitments end before the pipeline can convert.

13. Year One Success Metrics

Metrics separate pipeline measures, which Year One controls directly, from arrival measures, which lag by 12 to 24 months due to operator planning cycles.

13.1 Pipeline Metrics (Primary Year One Measures)

Goal	Target
Participating counties signed	7 plus the Qualla Boundary
Motorcoach-ready businesses enrolled	50
Hotels enrolled	15
Restaurants enrolled	25
Attractions enrolled	40
Trade shows attended	3
Tour operators contacted	150
FAM tours hosted	2
Itineraries developed and priced	10

13.2 Arrival and Impact Metrics (Year One Through Early Year Two)

Goal	Target
Confirmed tours booked	15
Estimated visitors	750
Hotel room nights	600
Estimated direct economic impact	$300,000+

Reporting: Visit Smokies delivers a quarterly dashboard to all partner TDAs covering leads, bookings, room nights, and spend estimates, using the same impression-value and efficiency framing already established in Visit Smokies performance reporting.

14. Three-Year Vision

By Year Three, Visit Smokies is recognized as the regional motorcoach sales organization for Western North Carolina. Participating counties no longer market individually to tour operators; they benefit from one coordinated program with professionally designed itineraries, annual FAM tours, a dedicated group travel website, and a growing network of domestic and international operators.

Measure	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Motorcoach arrivals	15	30-40	50-75
Estimated visitors	750	1,500-2,000	2,500-3,500
Hotel room nights	600	1,500+	3,000+
Direct visitor spending	$300,000+	$600,000+	$1,000,000+
Itineraries in market	10	14	18+

The same framework scales to specialty markets: student groups, international receptive business, family reunions, faith-based travel, and corporate incentive groups. Each rides on the identical infrastructure of readiness audits, itineraries, and the single point of contact, so every new market segment gets cheaper to enter than the last.

15. Key Considerations and Risk Management

Risk	Mitigation
Long booking lead times create a Year One results gap and board impatience	Report pipeline metrics quarterly; set arrival expectations at signing; celebrate FAM and itinerary milestones publicly
Coach parking and turnaround limits in small mountain downtowns	Phase Two audit documents workable routings and drop-off plans; counties fund targeted parking fixes where gaps block bookings
Large-group dining capacity is thin in several counties	Multi-county itinerary routing; staggered seatings; pre-order menus; recruit event venues and caterers as dining partners
Mountain road restrictions for 45-foot coaches	Publish approved routings in the Sales Guide so operators never discover a problem on arrival day
Partner fatigue if early bookings favor certain counties	Three-county minimum per itinerary; transparent quarterly reporting of activity by county
Seasonal crowding during October color season	Sell shoulder seasons aggressively (late spring, early summer, holiday); use fall demand as the hook, shoulder capacity as the yield play
Single-point-of-failure staffing at Visit Smokies	Documented processes and CRM from day one; budget a dedicated Group Sales role as volume grows

Sources referenced in this plan: American Bus Association Foundation, 2024 Economic Impact of Motorcoach Group Travel in the United States (Tourism Economics, 2025); ABA Foundation 2025 Motorcoach Economic Impact Report; ABA Marketplace and Travel South USA published event information.