



zoom

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Museum educator Sheyna Priest wears a colonial costume while giving living tours of the Historic Pensacola Village to tourists like Diana and Torsten Peters from Munich, Germany.  
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## The allure of the authentic 'Geotourism' focuses on history, culture

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Had your fill of the beach? Too much sand and sun and traffic?

Maybe it's that time during the vacation to take a breather, go off the beaten path and enjoy a little "geotourism."

No, it doesn't involve digging up rocks, or taking soil samples.

It's the new buzz word for a kind of travel that focuses on a destination's unique culture and history.

And, with its many layers of history and culture, the Pensacola Bay Area is in a good position to cash in on this growing tourist industry trend, local tourism officials say.

Pensacola's Convention and Visitors Center has put together geotourism packages that will appeal to a wide variety of interests and tastes.

For a way-off-the-beaten-path experience, there's the "Heartland Tour," brainchild of Lori Coppel, group tour manager for Pensacola's Convention and Visitors Bureau.

This tour includes stops at numerous farms in the area, possibly Mary B's biscuit plant in Milton, with the final venue being the Farmer's Opry in Chumuckla, offering music and a home-cooked meal.

"We are currently planning for our 2007-2008 year, and we are looking to create geotourism packages on the public relations front to showcase the unique venues that we offer," said Leah Harrison, the bureau's media and communications manager.

Harrison says Pensacola's 450 years of history offer opportunities to package creative geotours that will give visitors an entirely different perspective of the city. That history is reflected in places like the Historic Pensacola Village, the National Museum of Naval Aviation, the 150-year-old Pensacola Lighthouse, Old Christ Church and St. Michael's Cemetery.

"Guests can also explore the Gulf Islands National Seashore programs including barrier island walks, snorkeling, ranger show-and-tell, stargazing and moon walks all on our federally protected shoreline," Harrison said.

The geotourism trend is catching on in other parts of the country, especially where local cultures, cuisines and histories create an attractive and unique mix for visitors.

Geotours might involve traveling to a seaside New England clam shack for fried clams. Listening to jazz in New Orleans. Visiting a small organic coffee farm in Guatemala.

The term is so new that few tourists use it. But it's on the lips of travel professionals who describe it as a step beyond the better-known environmentally friendly ecotourism.

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Among the foundations of the geotourism philosophy is its benefit to the local population. When destinations highlight the things that make them special, it not only draws more tourists, it also helps the local community appreciate its own uniqueness. That, in turn, motivates them to preserve the cultural or natural resources that keep tourists coming.

"So it's not all the Wal-Marts and McDonalds that they aspire to. It gives them a sense of pride in who they are and what they do," said Don Holecek, professor of tourism at Michigan State University and director of the university's Tourism Center.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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