Cultural Tourism in Utah

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Recent national and international studies conducted by the Utah Division of Travel Development note that local culture is one of the state’s prime tourist draws. For example, just as many tourists visit historic Mormon Temple Square in Salt Lake City as visit all of the state’s national parks combined. Cultural events comprised 18% of the activities in which tourists engaged in 2002. This figure reflects national trends: a 1997 study by the Travel Industry of America found that nearly ninety-three million Americans planned their trips to include cultural, arts, history, or heritage tourism. It also found that tourists drawn by local cultural programming spend an average of $174 more per visit than other tourists.

Over the last fifty years, Utah’s economy has been shifting away from agriculture, extractive industries, and manufacturing and toward the service sector. In 1997, service work provided 61% of all nonagricultural jobs in the state, with tourism providing nearly one out of every nine jobs in 2002. Especially for rural communities experiencing a major decline in traditional industries such as mining and logging, tourism has become a major source of income. Tourism has also been good for Utah’s public coffers, generating $475 per Utah household in state and local tax revenues, a total of $322 million in 2002. Around the world, there has been a remarkable increase in attempts to improve the economic situations of rural areas through tourism based on local resources, both human and physical. Part of this process involves the commodification of culture, the valorization of place, and the marketing of local products. Between 1996 and 2003, cultural and heritage tourism in the United States increased 10%.

Utah’s state government and its local communities and organizations are trying to benefit from the trend toward cultural tourism by actively marketing local customs, sites of historic interest, and heritage products like quilts, fruit, saddles, beadwork, and woodcarving. The Utah Division of Travel Development notes that “Authenticity and substance are paramount. . . . Consumers are bored with superlatives. They want ‘real.’ Unless destinations can dramatize their unique and differentiable qualities, consumers will buy based on price. . . . Among the travel implications for this shift is a greater emphasis on personal spirituality, including history, culture and heritage.” Labeling tourism a “spiritual” journey
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is not as strange as it may first appear. Anthropologists have long noted that traveling can be like a rite of passage for tourists in that they enter a liminal state outside their normal space and their normal routines. In addition, cultural tourists often seek out “authentic” local celebrations in a “quest for original communitas” (in Rachid Amirou’s phrase), a search for community, identity, place, and social belonging. Tourism can sometimes serve a deeper purpose for local communities, too, as a means of creating or reinforcing a specific local identity. The identity markers they choose to emphasize may range from foods, crafts, architecture, dramas, or historic sites to entire landscape systems.

Local cultural celebrations can be a particularly effective way for communities to distinguish themselves from their neighbors as a means of defining themselves and of enticing tourists. Celebrations are especially good at drawing “resident tourists,” people who do not stay in hotels but travel up to 150 miles for cultural events. Today, Utah’s ethnic communities celebrate many traditional events important to contemporary life, but they are also drawing larger, more diverse audiences than in the past. Small celebrations that were once confined to specific communities have become large events that embrace outsiders. For example, Salt Lake City’s Greek Festival draws tens of thousands of visitors every September. Volunteers from the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church now spend five months each year preparing food for the festival. This celebration and other community displays are touted by tourism organizations at both the state and local level.

Price has an annual Greek festival, too. Payson, Salt Lake City, and West Valley City have Scottish festivals. St. Patrick’s Day celebrations are held around the state (my favorite is Springdale’s St. Patrick’s Day Festival and Green Jell-O Sculpture Contest, combining Irish-American pride with the icon of Utah foodways). Other ethnic festivals include Ephraim’s Scandinavian Heritage Festival, Spanish Fork’s Himalayan Performing Arts Festival, Elsinore’s Danish Heritage Days, Wales’s Welsh Days, Price’s Slovenian Picnic, Midway’s Swiss Days, Oktoberfest at Snowbird, Sauerkraut Days in Providence, and West Valley City’s Polynesian Festival. Salt Lake City ethnic groups annually host a Celtic Festival, Basque Supper, Friendly Island Tongan Festival, Tongan Old Boys Celebration, and the Tongan Po Hiva Christmas Concert. Native Americans and others gather at powwows at Utah State University, Heber Valley, Neola, White Mesa, Fort Duchesne, and other Utah locales. Cedar City’s Paiute Restoration Gathering and Pow-Wow began in the 1970s after the Paiute were restored to tribal status.

Since the U.S. Bicentennial, Utah has experienced an increase in multiethnic festivals. The Utah Arts Council’s Folk Arts Program, established in 1976, was one of the first state programs designed specifically to serve traditional arts and artists. Since 1986, the program has hosted the Living Traditions Festival in Salt Lake City (modeled after the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. and a southern Arizona festival called “Tucson Meet Yourself”) to celebrate ethnic diversity. In 2003, six hundred artists represented forty local communities; the festival featured Vietnamese, African American,
Another multiethnic event is the Asian Pacific Festival, which has been held in the Salt Lake area every year since 1977. In 2003, the festival grew large enough to move to a large exposition center. Not only does the festival bring together people with origins all over Asia and the Pacific—from Tonga to Tibet, China to Cambodia—it also draws people from outside those immigrant communities. The festival has become an important source of fundraising opportunities for local nonprofit groups and even offers an occasion for political activism, encouraging voter-registration initiatives and the organization of groups like the
Pacific Islander Republican Assembly. West Fest in West Valley City is another popular multiethnic celebration.

Occupational festivals like American Fork Steel Days and Park City Miner’s Day are other ways for communities to distinguish themselves. But the largest set of occupational festivals in Utah revolves around agriculture; many rural communities in the state celebrate the harvest of their signature product. Fruit is feted during Peach Days in Ferron and Brigham City; apples in Torrey, Glendale, and River Heights; strawberries in Pleasant Grove; raspberries in Garden City; trout and berries in Paradise City; and melons in Green River. Among the most colorful fruit fests is the Sanpitch Rhubarb Festival in Mt. Pleasant. Vendors hawk rhubarb in more forms than one could imagine, from pizza, barbeque sauce, salsa, and scones to the more predictable ice cream, shakes, cobbler, and pies. Central to the festival celebration is the performance of the Rhubarb Rock.

Vegetables, grains, and herbs also get their due. Enterprise hosts an annual Corn Festival, Garland has Wheat and Beet Days, Payson boasts its Onion Days, and Midvale has Harvest Days. Many rural communities also invite visitors to tour corn mazes in October. Pumpkins attract October visitors, too; especially popular are Jensen’s Great Pumpkin Festival and North Logan’s Pumpkin Walk, which takes on a different theme for its pumpkin tableaux each year.

Livestock make great centerpieces for community festivals and cultural tourism. Richmond’s Black and White Days celebrate Holstein dairying. Soldier Hollow’s Classic Sheepdog Championship is a multiethnic event involving dogs, their trainers, Scottish bagpipers, Navajo rug-makers, and Mexican food vendors. Fountain Green holds an annual Lamb Days Festival. One of the newer livestock celebrations is Spanish Fork’s Llama Festival, sponsored by the local Krishna Temple. The festival began in 1994 to showcase the social uses of llamas, from spinning and weaving demonstrations to llama racing and handling competitions, all against a festival backdrop of food and music.

King among occupational/agricultural festivals is the rodeo. Utah has a plethora of them, often matched up with powwows, county fairs, or cowboy poetry gatherings. Morgala, Draper, Clinton, Heber, Vernal, Nephi, Pleasant Grove, Sanpete, Manila, Oakley, and Bluff all have summer rodeos. Several others—Salt Lake City and Ogden among them—are timed to coincide with the July 24th state holiday that commemorates the arrival of the first Mormon pioneers in 1847. Pioneer Day celebrations generally include parades, picnics, and fireworks as well. Salt Lake’s Days of ’47 Parade is the largest; in fact, it claims to be one of the largest and oldest parades in the United States. The parade culminates in Liberty Park, where, since 1995, it has been greeted by the “Native American Celebration in the Park” and an intertribal powwow.

Other festivals have tried to create a “conscious model of past lifeways,” in Stanley Brandes’s phrase, by highlighting a community’s history and its Mormon, cowboy, agricultural, or other roots. The Canyon Country Western Arts Festival celebrates the American cowboy in Cedar City; Tremonton has
an annual Western Heritage Festival, too. The Festival of the American West in Wellsville and living history museums like the Jensen Farm in Cache County, Wheeler Farm in Salt Lake County, and Old Deseret Village at This Is the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City follow this trend as well. Among the more unusual of the heritage celebrations is Panguitch’s Quilt Walk commemoration. When Panguitch’s original pioneer settlers ran desperately short of supplies their first bitter winter in the area, some of the men decided they had to go over the mountain to Parowan to seek help. They found it impossible to cross the deep mountain snows until they realized they could spread their quilts on the snow and walk without sinking. In 1997, when Panguitch decided to start reenacting the event annually, it was wisely decided to do so in the summer—when odds of attracting tourists are better.

The creation of the Quilt Walk stems from a cultural tourism-based economic initiative led by the State of Utah’s Department of Community and Economic Development: its 1990 proposal to designate the U.S. Highway 89 corridor the National Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area. National Heritage Area designation is meant to recognize areas where “natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from the patterns of human activity shaped by geography.” In conjunction with local governments and private businesses, the National Park Service manages and interprets those places fitting the “thematic story” of an area. The twenty-three sites around the United States that have already received the designation (none of them yet in Utah) have seen a significant impact on their cultural tourism infrastructure and have had impressive 8.7-to-1 rates of leveraging matching funds from government and the private sector.

Highway 89 now represents a classic model of early Mormon settlement. Under the direction of Brigham Young, Mormon pioneers established towns every five to twenty miles along the highway. The route was later bypassed by interstate freeways and industrial development, and so it retains a fairly small population (about 60,000 people) and much of its rural character. The proposed Heritage Highway 89 Area would cover 300 miles from Utah County to the Arizona border. Heritage Area planners have identified five zones along the corridor: Little Denmark in Sanpete County; the Sevier Valley; “The Headwaters” from southern Sevier County to Orderville; “Under the Rim,” the rock-rimmed stretch of riverways on the Colorado Plateau from Mt. Carmel to Pipe Springs, Arizona; and the Boulder Loop. The Heritage Area is already being marketed as a crafts corridor through catalogs, internet sites, and the locally organized Utah Heritage Products Alliance. Local produce and festivals are also keys to marketing the region. Grants from several public agencies are helping to subsidize the development of area tours run by two private tour companies.

Utah has also designated several State Heritage Areas (many of them contenders for National Heritage status, too): the Four Corners Heritage Area, the Great Basin Heritage Area, the San Rafael Western Frontier Heritage Area, and the Mountain Spirit Heritage Area. A sixth region, the Bear River Heritage Area,
spans the Utah-Idaho border. It is a land of striking scenery and history; it was the home of the Northwest Band of the Shoshone, it was crucial to the historic fur trade, it was colonized by Mormons in the 1850s and ’60s, and today it is proud of its strong agricultural economy and ethnic diversity. The Bear River Heritage Council, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Bear River Association of Governments, AmeriCorps, and folklorists at Utah State University, has created a cultural tourism plan to “focus on and promote the soul of the area.” USU’s Living Traditions fieldwork has documented historic barns, irrigation practices, Cambodian holidays, textile traditions, and agricultural festivals, among other practices. This fieldwork led to the “Guide to the Bear River Heritage Area,” a booklet identifying “heritage businesses” in the region along with calendars of cultural events and mini-essays on local traditions. It also led to a barn preservation initiative and a taped driving tour of Cache Valley. Similarly, the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council has prepared a driving tour of Sanpete County narrated by local residents and a booklet with essays on cultural themes, photographs of local art, and maps. Other recorded tours are in development for U. S. Highway 40 between Heber City and Vernal and for State Highway 12 between Panguitch and Torrey.

This is not to suggest that tourism always has positive effects on host communities. It tends to pay less than other occupations. Locals may find themselves subject to an invasive and sometimes demeaning tourist gaze. It can lead to commercial and residential overdevelopment of once-isolated rural areas. Often, local culture may be modified and commodified to sell it to outsiders. But the financial support for vibrant community traditions, an appreciation of local folk practices, increased interethnic cooperation, and recognition of the benefits of diversity are some of the positive side effects of cultural tourism—for hosts and guests alike.