

RALEIGH, N.C. — [Visit North Carolina](#) was honored this week by the U.S. Travel Association and its National Council of State Tourism Directors with a Mercury Award for "Recovery Efforts: Punching Above Their Weight," the state tourism marketing organization's response to the disruptions of COVID-19.

In its comprehensive response to the pandemic, Visit NC worked with destinations from the mountains to the coast and partnered with state and national organizations on major initiatives. "Recovery Efforts: Punching Above Their Weight" included:

- [Count On Me NC](#), a safety initiative in partnership with the N.C. Restaurant and Lodging Association, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services and N.C. State Extension to train attractions and public-facing business and support safety-conscious travel.
- [Outdoor NC](#), a partnership with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Leadership to promote sustainability as travelers flocked to North Carolina's public lands.
- [#CookItForwardNC](#), a social media campaign to support restaurants and workers affected by pandemic-related closures.
- Administration of a \$5 million marketing credit program and \$1.5 million grant program to assist local organizations market destinations hit hard by revenue losses.
- Heightened communication with tourism partners, an effort that incorporated expanded research initiatives and 33 webinars to connect local tourism leaders with the Visit NC staff and outside experts.
- The launch of [Drive Thru Vacations](#), a safety-conscious return-to-travel campaign, followed by the multi-channel "[Get Back to a Better Place](#)" brand campaign.

"Recognition is always gratifying," said Wit Tuttell, director of Visit NC, a unit of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. "But the real honor here has come from strengthening the bond between tourism leaders across our 100 counties and other state partners as we've responded to a devastating crisis."

The Mercury Award was presented in Los Angeles at U.S. Travel's Educational Seminar for Tourism Organization. Visit NC's competition in the finals of the Advocacy and Grassroots Campaign category were the state tourism offices of Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 curbed the long-running growth of North Carolina's vital tourism industry, long a major economic engine for the state and its communities. In 2020, visitor spending dropped 29.5 percent to \$19.96 billion. The tourism-supported workforce decreased 26.4 percent to 178,700 jobs. Tourism payroll dipped to \$6.4 billion, a nearly 25 percent decrease from a record-breaking 2019. State and local governments saw similar decreases in visitor generated tax revenues to \$1.8 billion from \$2.4 billion in 2019.

"In the aftermath of hurricanes, we always talk about the resiliency of North Carolina and its residents," Tuttell said. "While the pandemic has been more relentless than any storm we've ever endured, we can draw on the same resourcefulness and determination to rebuild an industry that capitalizes on the state's natural beauty, culture and innovation, its sense of adventure, and an authentic desire to reward travelers with the best experiences in the best of places. The Mercury Award reflects our ability to work together and make our recovery possible."

About Visit North Carolina:

Visit North Carolina is part of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. Established in 2014, the EDPNC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that oversees the state's efforts in business and job recruitment and retention, international trade, and tourism, film and sports development. The mission of Visit North Carolina is to unify and lead the state in developing North Carolina as a major destination for leisure travel, group tours, meetings and conventions, sports events and film production. For more information on North Carolina's destinations and travel assets, go to VisitNC.com.

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