

Op-Eds : Destination Gap WBUR-FM Arts Online

Boston is adrift in the brave new competition among big American cities vying for tourist dollars.

BOSTON, Mass. - July 27, 2006 - By Maureen Dezell:

Benjamin Franklin would have turned 300 last January. In Philadelphia, the anniversary spurred a frisson of forums, commemorations, and civic celebrations. There is also an international exhibition. "Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World," which opened at the City of Brotherly Love's Constitution Hall in December, and will travel to four U.S cities and Paris.

Boston -- Franklin's birthplace -- is not a stop on the Big Ben tour. This no-show is symptomatic of the city's complacent attitude to cultural tourism, which is the fastest growing segment of the \$645 billion U.S tourism market. Attracting visitors is a competitive new world -- one in which Boston seems to be somewhat adrift.

Historic and culture-rich cities from Seattle to Chicago to Philadelphia have been packaging and marketing themselves as "cultural destinations" for at least five years. Regional promoters package cultural attractions and tourist incentives (read: discounts) to cultural tourists: well-heeled adults who would rather see a new city, visit an historic site, or go to a museum or concert while they're on vacation than sit on a beach or shop until they drop.

The Franklin Fest, like virtually every big event in Philadelphia, was convened, coordinated, produced and marketed by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation (GPTMC), a private not for profit founded 10 years ago by the city of Philadelphia, state of Pennsylvania and the Pew Charitable Trusts and funded since 1999 by a 1 percent hotel tax.

GPTMC invests heavily in research, targeted multimedia advertising and public relations that tout the spiffed up City of Brotherly Love as a fascinating, friendly, destination -- ideally situated between New York (a 90 minute train trip from Philly) and Washington, D.C. (two and a half hours away by car or train).

Leisure travel to Philadelphia and its surrounding four counties has grown by 55 percent since 1997, the year GPTMC began advertising. Last year, 8.86 million visitors stayed overnight and spent \$7 billion in Greater Philadelphia, according to travel industry analysts. The GPTMC is widely credited with returning Philly's fallen star to the tourism and travel map.

Boston, on the other hand, has paid next to no attention as other U.S. culture capitals have scrambled to compete for cultural travelers and tourists. This is not because the Hub is already selling itself well. It's isn't. Leisure travel to Boston and the Bay State has been largely static since the late 1990s, according to state and national travel and tourism statistics.

"We're losing out because we're not paying attention to basics -- to resources and economies right here under our noses," says Boston City Councilor John Tobin, chairman of the council's Arts Humanities and Tourism and Film Committee.

Tourism is the third largest industry in Massachusetts, and cultural tourism is among the region's richest resources, points out Boston Foundation president Paul Grogan. But tourism in the Bay State, like arts and culture, is vaunted, undervalued, and negligibly funded by the public sector, he observes. The City of Boston arts budget is ludicrously low (\$541,000), and the Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism and Special Events has earmarked a piddling \$95,000 for tourism promotion in the coming year. Why so little? Massachusetts operates under a home rule regulation -- an antiquated system, in which the Commonwealth of Massachusetts controls what's taxed in cities and towns in the state.

Boston cannot levy its own sales tax, or a hotel tax, without approval from the state legislature, which is historically loath to relinquish money and power. What's worse is that Boston's revenue comes from three sources: local aid from the state, fines and fees, and property tax revenues.

Real estate revenues are constricted because more than half the property within Boston city limits belongs to non-profit entities, including the Commonwealth's government offices, universities, hospitals, religious organizations and cultural institutions. Boston mayors have trundled up to Beacon Hill each year for years, seeking a source of revenue for basic needs, and returned empty handed.

For two decades, state support for arts and tourism has been erratic. The Massachusetts Legislature's recent, near-unanimous vote to establish a \$250 million statewide cultural facilities fund marked a welcome, radical public policy departure, notes Grogan, who pushed hard for passage of the measure.

Absent reasonable and reliable public support, Boston cultural organizations depend more traveler and tourist dollars than their counterparts in almost every other state.

Tourist promotion matters -- a lot. Yet, in addition to underfunding our arts and culture, "we've been very, very poor at promoting ourselves," says Grogan. "We seem to have this attitude that we don't have to do this kind of thing! That somehow we're above all that," he says wryly. That attitude, coupled with a lack of investment, is diminishing Greater Boston's allure not only as a place to visit, but as an attractive region in which to live and do business.

City officials don't see a widening cultural tourism gap. "Philadelphia is doing a fantastic job marketing the city," Julie Burns, director of Boston's Office of Arts, Tourism, and Special Events, acknowledged in an interview. "But they have a different model than we do [a partnership of public, private and philanthropic interests]. They have more access to capital. They have more money."

"Boston has traditionally ranked in the Top 5 of national tourism destinations in the U.S. and top 10 internationally," Burns added confidently and briskly, eager to dismiss what she considers a tangential topic. The truth is that 'traditional rankings' don't count for much -- particularly those, like Burns', that rely on dated numbers that are out of sync with current, credible statistics.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Boston in 1999 ranked tenth among preferred U.S. destinations for European travelers; Philadelphia was 21st. In 2003, Philly had climbed to 12th place and Boston held on to the 10th position on the list, which is where it remained in the department's 2005 survey, though that survey noted that overseas visitor volume to Boston and elsewhere in the U.S. were down.

International travel and tourism to the U.S. has indeed been declining since 2000. It has dropped precipitously in the past two years, according to the independent Travel Industry Association of America. A recent Pew Foundation study showed that European visitorship --

Boston's most reliable and stable travel market -- is expected to plummet in 2006 and the following few years. Meanwhile, in the domestic travel market, Philadelphia overtook the Athens of America as the country's number two history tourism destination in 2003, according to an America Online/Travel + Leisure survey noted in "Culture is Our Commonwealth," a comprehensive, widely circulated 2004 Boston Foundation Study that raised flags about Boston's shrinking tourist market.

"Boston has so many great assets that we've assumed that we didn't have to try as hard as other cities, and for many, many years that's been true," says Children's Museum director Lou Casagrande. But indications that other cities are trying harder, spending more and posing a formidable threat to the Boston cultural tourism have been looming larger in each of the past few years, he adds.

Casagrande came face to face with the disquieting trend on his way to work one day early last year, when he spotted a billboard touting special hotel deals and tickets to the Salvador Dali exhibition at the Philadelphia Art Museum. On Boston's waterfront. It was part of a GPTMC multimedia advertising campaign, targeted at East Coast cultural tourism markets.

And it worked: the Dali show, the second most attended show in the Philadelphia Art Museum's history, drew 85 percent of its visitor ship from outside Philadelphia. More than half came from New York, Washington, D.C. and Boston, where the promo ads ran.

The GPTMC has said it plans to invest approximately \$10 million this year to market Philadelphia and its four surrounding counties. That is approximately \$2.5 million more than last year's budget for the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, the state agency in charge of promoting the entire commonwealth, from the Berkshires, to Boston and the Cape. (Massachusetts's tourism promotion budget ranks 35th among 50 states', according to the latest TIA survey.)

The arts in this city are essentially privately funded, "says Tobin." "We are the only major city in country without a dedicated source of capital support or dedicated revenue stream from the local government for the arts," he adds. An Americans for the Arts survey backs up his claim. What's more, he says, the public and private entities that promote the arts and tourism don't work well together and they don't lead.

"I would rather make an investment in cultural tourism and the arts than boost someone's parking ticket up another \$15," Tobin adds. "For every dollar we spend on tourism, the city gets back \$6 or \$7 in revenue." For a city so proud of its creative legacy, that's a no-brainer of a proposition.