

Below is a comprehensive tourism marketing plan for DeSoto County, Florida, designed to highlight its unique “Florida Wild” identity, leveraging its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and authentic rural charm to attract visitors. The plan is informed by the county’s existing assets, such as the Peace River, Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo, and historic downtown Arcadia, and aims to position DeSoto County as a must-visit destination for outdoor enthusiasts, families, and cultural travelers.

DeSoto County, Florida: Tourism Marketing Plan

1. Executive Summary

DeSoto County, located in the Florida Heartland, offers a unique blend of unspoiled natural landscapes, authentic cowboy culture, and historic charm. This marketing plan aims to increase tourism by promoting the county’s key attractions—such as the Peace River, Arcadia’s antique shopping, and the iconic Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo—while targeting specific audience segments like outdoor adventurers, families, and heritage travelers. The strategy focuses on digital marketing, partnerships, community engagement, and sustainable tourism development to drive visitor growth and economic impact over a three-year period.

2. Situational Analysis

Strengths:

- **Unique Identity:** Known as “Florida Wild,” DeSoto County offers an authentic, unhurried experience with natural attractions like the Peace River and cultural events like the Arcadia Rodeo.
- **Key Attractions:** The Peace River (canoeing, kayaking, fossil hunting), Arcadia’s historic downtown (antique shopping), and the nearly 100-year-old Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo.
- **Strategic Location:** One hour from Sarasota, Bradenton, and Fort Myers, with access to three airports and the Florida Turnpike.
- **Community Support:** Strong local leadership and a Tourism Development Department led by Sondra Guffey, focused on promoting the county.
- **Emerging Developments:** Proximity to the Sunseeker Resort in neighboring Charlotte County, which could draw spillover visitors.

Weaknesses:

- Limited awareness of DeSoto County compared to coastal Florida destinations.

- Infrastructure gaps, such as broadband coverage, which could hinder digital marketing efforts.
- Smaller population (33,976 as of 2020) limits local workforce for large-scale tourism initiatives.
- Seasonal climate challenges, with peak rainfall from June to September.

Opportunities:

- Growing interest in eco-tourism and authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences.
- Leverage partnerships with VISIT FLORIDA and regional tourism boards to amplify reach.
- Capitalize on the Sunseeker Resort's opening to attract visitors to nearby DeSoto County.
- Expand digital marketing to reach broader audiences beyond the Florida Heartland.

Threats:

- Competition from more established Florida destinations like Orlando, Miami, or St. Petersburg.
- Potential for hurricanes or natural disasters, as seen with Hurricane Charley in 2004.
- Economic dependence on agriculture and limited diversification may slow tourism infrastructure growth.

3. Target Audience

1. Outdoor Enthusiasts (Ages 25-55):

- Interested in kayaking, canoeing, airboat tours, fossil hunting, and camping along the Peace River.
- Likely to value eco-friendly and sustainable travel experiences.

2. Families with Children (Ages 30-50):

- Seeking affordable, nature-based activities like camping, wildlife sanctuaries (e.g., Lions, Tigers & Bears), and family-friendly events like the Arcadia Rodeo.

3. Heritage and Cultural Travelers (Ages 35-65):

- Drawn to historic downtown Arcadia, antique shopping, and cowboy culture.
- Interested in agricultural experiences like citrus grove tours at Joshua Citrus.

4. **Retirees and Snowbirds (Ages 55+):**

- Attracted to RV resorts, campgrounds, and the relaxed, unhurried pace of DeSoto County.
- Likely to stay for extended periods during winter months (mid-70s temperatures).

4. **Marketing Objectives**

1. **Increase Visitor Numbers:** Achieve a 15% increase in annual visitors to DeSoto County by 2028 through targeted marketing campaigns.
2. **Enhance Brand Awareness:** Establish “Florida Wild” as a recognized brand for authentic, nature-based tourism in Florida, reaching 1 million digital impressions annually.
3. **Boost Local Economy:** Increase tourism-related revenue by 10% annually through visitor spending on lodging, dining, and attractions.
4. **Promote Sustainability:** Develop eco-friendly tourism initiatives to preserve natural assets like the Peace River and support long-term growth.

5. **Marketing Strategies**

A. **Brand Positioning**

- **Tagline:** “Discover Florida Wild in DeSoto County”
- Emphasize the county’s unspoiled landscapes, authentic cowboy culture, and historic charm as an antidote to crowded urban destinations.
- Highlight the contrast to typical Florida tourism: “Leave the crowds behind for the real Florida experience.”

B. **Digital Marketing**

- **Website Optimization:**
 - Enhance www.visitdesoto.com with interactive maps, event calendars, and booking tools for attractions like Canoe Outpost and Peace River Charters.

- Ensure mobile responsiveness and SEO optimization for terms like “Florida Wild,” “Peace River kayaking,” and “Arcadia Rodeo.”
- **Social Media Campaigns:**
 - Platforms: Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube.
 - Content: Short videos showcasing Peace River adventures, rodeo highlights, and antique shopping; user-generated content contests (e.g., #FloridaWildAdventure).
 - Partner with influencers in outdoor, family, and heritage travel niches to reach 100,000+ followers.
- **Email Marketing:**
 - Expand the DeSoto County newsletter subscriber base by 20% annually through sign-ups at www.visitdesotocounty.com.
 - Send monthly newsletters with event updates, special offers, and seasonal itineraries.
- **Digital Ads:**
 - Run Google Ads and social media ads targeting outdoor enthusiasts and families within a 200-mile radius (Tampa, Orlando, Miami).
 - Budget: \$10,000 annually for paid digital campaigns.

C. Partnerships and Collaborations

- **VISIT FLORIDA Partnership:**
 - Collaborate with VISIT FLORIDA to include DeSoto County in statewide campaigns and access their marketing research tools.
- **Regional Alliances:**
 - Partner with the Sunseeker Resort and neighboring counties (Charlotte, Hardee, Highlands) to create multi-destination itineraries.
 - Join the Heartland Library Cooperative to promote cultural events.
- **Local Business Engagement:**
 - Work with businesses like Joshua Citrus, Peace River Charters, and Lions, Tigers & Bears to offer bundled packages (e.g., grove tour + airboat ride).

- Support local events through the Event Marketing Grants program (up to \$3,000 per event).

D. Content Marketing

- **Blog and Video Series:**

- Create a “Florida Wild Adventures” blog on visitdesoto.com, covering topics like “Top 5 Peace River Activities” and “A Day in Historic Arcadia.”
- Produce YouTube videos featuring local guides (e.g., Canoe Outpost staff) and visitor testimonials.

- **Tourism Brochure:**

- Update and distribute the DeSoto Tourism Brochure (PDF) at regional visitor centers and online.
- Highlight key attractions with QR codes linking to booking pages.

- **Media Outreach:**

- Pitch stories to travel publications like Florida Travel Blog and Spectrum News 13, focusing on Arcadia’s antique capital status and Peace River adventures.

E. Community-Based Tourism

- **Local Events:**

- Promote the Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo (March 9-12 annually) as the flagship event, targeting regional and national audiences.
- Support smaller events like “Brunch in the Park” and DeSoto Arts Center exhibitions through social media and grants.

- **Cultural Experiences:**

- Develop guided tours of historic downtown Arcadia and citrus groves, emphasizing the county’s heritage and agricultural roots.
- Partner with the DeSoto County Chamber of Commerce to integrate Leadership DeSoto participants in tourism promotion.

F. Sustainable Tourism Initiatives

- **Eco-Friendly Practices:**

- Promote low-impact activities like kayaking and fossil hunting with guidelines to protect the Peace River ecosystem.

- Partner with Canoe Outpost to educate visitors on environmental conservation.
- **Infrastructure Improvements:**
 - Support broadband expansion to enhance digital access for visitors and businesses.
 - Advocate for additional boat ramps and walking paths to improve access to natural attractions.

6. Implementation Plan

Year 1 (2025-2026):

- Launch updated www.visitdesoto.com with interactive features (Q1).
- Initiate social media campaigns and influencer partnerships (Q2).
- Distribute updated tourism brochure at regional visitor centers (Q3).
- Secure VISIT FLORIDA partnership and promote Arcadia Rodeo (Q4).
- Budget: \$50,000 (website, digital ads, brochures, grants).

Year 2 (2026-2027):

- Expand digital ad campaigns to target out-of-state markets (Q1).
- Develop bundled attraction packages with local businesses (Q2).
- Host a “Florida Wild Festival” to showcase outdoor activities and local culture (Q3).
- Evaluate visitor data and adjust campaigns based on performance (Q4).
- Budget: \$75,000 (ads, festival, partnerships).

Year 3 (2027-2028):

- Launch a loyalty program for repeat visitors (e.g., discounts at RV resorts) (Q1).
- Partner with Sunseeker Resort to create joint marketing campaigns (Q2).
- Expand eco-tourism initiatives with guided conservation tours (Q3).
- Measure progress toward 15% visitor increase and refine strategies (Q4).
- Budget: \$100,000 (loyalty program, partnerships, conservation).

7. Budget Allocation

- **Digital Marketing:** \$30,000/year (website, social media, ads)
- **Content Creation:** \$15,000/year (videos, blogs, brochures)
- **Event Promotion:** \$20,000/year (grants, rodeo marketing)
- **Partnerships:** \$10,000/year (VISIT FLORIDA, regional alliances)
- **Sustainability Initiatives:** \$5,000/year (eco-tourism programs)
- **Contingency:** \$10,000/year
- **Total (3 Years):** \$225,000

8. Metrics for Success

- **Visitor Numbers:** Track annual visitor counts via hotel bookings, attraction ticket sales, and event attendance.
- **Digital Engagement:** Measure website traffic, social media impressions, and newsletter sign-ups.
- **Economic Impact:** Monitor tourism-related revenue through sales tax data and business surveys.
- **Sustainability:** Assess environmental impact through feedback from Canoe Outpost and Peace River Charters.

9. Conclusion

This tourism marketing plan positions DeSoto County as a premier destination for authentic, nature-based, and cultural experiences in Florida. By leveraging digital marketing, strategic partnerships, and community engagement, the county can attract diverse audiences while preserving its unique “Florida Wild” identity. With a focus on sustainability and collaboration, DeSoto County is poised to become a top destination in the Florida Heartland by 2028.
