

State Tourism Director Spotlight

Name: Lee Sentell

Title: Director

Company/Department: Alabama Tourism Dept.

City/State: Montgomery, Alabama



Have you always worked within Tourism? What is the path that got you to your current role and how long have you been in your current role?

I was a newspaper reporter and editor before becoming the first tourism director for Decatur, Ala., and then marketing director at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center for the first decade of Space Camp. I was the Huntsville CVB tourism director under Judy Ryals when the governor of Alabama appointed me to this Cabinet-level position 16 years ago. I start my fifth term this month with my third governor. My agency and Luckie & Company ad agency created the U.S. Civil Rights Trail a year ago. Working with other board members of Travel South, our goal is to attain UNESCO World Heritage Site status for a handful of major civil rights landmarks in July 2021.

Is there a signature food or culinary dish in your state that we need to partake in?

Restaurants in the Birmingham area have earned five James Beard Awards. Frank Stitt, whose Highlands Bar & Grill was named the best restaurant in America last May, trained Chris Hastings (a Beard winner who once beat Bobby Flay). Locals line up at Hot & Hot Fish Club each spring for Chris's signature Tomato Salad that features Alabama heirloom tomatoes, vegetables and crisp bacon. It's a meal.

Outside of your state, where have you experienced the best vacation of all time?

I have several favorites. My first cruise was in Alaska on my parents' 50th anniversary. When President Obama opened Cuba for travel, my friends and I happened to be in Havana when Secretary of State John Cary and NBC's Lester Holt stayed in our hotel. I've been on photo safaris in Africa. I'm a big fan of history, so I've been to Greece a number of times, but London is my favorite city.

When it comes to vacation, is there a destination or two that still remain on your bucket list and would you be willing to share them with us?

My to-do list includes Egypt and the Holy Land.

Any words of wisdom for those just starting out in, or studying for, a career in travel and tourism?

I advise recent college graduates to volunteer for committees and do grunt work to establish your image as a cheerful worker. People think that "it's *who* you know" that counts in getting the next job. That's wrong. "It's *who* knows *you*."



The Dalai Lama accepts a gift, featuring Rosa Parks, from Lee Sentell of the Alabama Tourism Department