

explore  
**RIDGELAND**

destination business plan



natchez trace parkway

**FY 2026**



explore  
**RIDGELAND**

renaissance at colony park

# annual economic impact of travel in ridgeland, ms

1.3 million  
visitors

1,210  
jobs created

\$123.7 million  
in visitor spending

\$139.8 million  
total economic impact

\$17.0 million  
in state & local taxes

# our mission

elevate and support Ridgeland's hospitality industry, driving economic growth and enhancing quality of life through increased travel spending

# our vision

sustain tourism economic growth while elevating Ridgeland's brand and position as central Mississippi's premier destination for shopping, dining, outdoor recreation, and sports tourism

# our values

wellness

inclusion

sustainability

accessibility

collaboration

resilience

## *Diversity & Inclusion*

*The Ridgeland Tourism Commission believes that celebrating and cultivating diversity, equity and inclusion are key to creating a vibrant economy. We support an environment that fosters and represents the unique backgrounds and perspectives of all visitors and members. The Ridgeland Tourism Commission is committed to demonstrating these values through our policies, practices, services, and community engagement.*

# meet the board



## **NAMES LEFT TO RIGHT:**

### **Back Row**

**David Conn, Secretary/Treasurer (4 Top Hospitality, restaurant)**

**Lesley Holleman, Chairman of the Board (Fleet Feet, Chamber At-Large)**

**Williams Merchant, Vice Chairman (Soulshine Pizza Factory, restaurant)**

### **Front Row**

**Patrice Wells (Intermountain Management, lodging)**

**Carla Palmer (CPA Realty LLC, Chamber At-Large)**

**Not Pictured: Todd Leach (Springhill Suites, lodging)**

# fy26 tourism development objectives

- Execute the 5-year strategic plan
- Increase lodging and restaurant demand, revenue, and visitation by 3–5%
- Identify opportunities to increase visitation during off-season
- Foster development of sports, conference, and outdoor recreation infrastructure to drive overnight tourism
- Encourage and support new meeting space in proximity to lodging
- Promote sports development that earns a high ROI (new facilities, more road races and events, and new sports tournaments—particularly on weekends)
- Continue to support and identify sporting events that benefit Ridgeland’s tourism industry
- Champion the City and partners to continue linking Ridgeland’s trail system together
- Assess and identify continued growth opportunities for the Explore Ridgeland Bikeshare Program
- Work with Pearl River Valley and partners on accessible reservoir development
- Support Jackson Street redevelopment as a quaint main street (east–west corridor)
- Research and develop an Explore Ridgeland Ambassador Program to train local tourism advocates
- Grow Explore Ridgeland’s Hospitality Training Program to empower partners through continuous learning and connection
- Continue to collaborate with public and private partners to enhance events and tourism projects
- Cultivate updated sales and marketing strategies to promote Ridgeland’s attractions and trails
- Develop sales and marketing strategies for promoting Topgolf and Ridgeland’s Historical Marker Trail
- Continue capturing new photography and videography to strengthen Ridgeland’s brand image
- Utilize ARPA Grant II funding to expand Ridgeland’s advertising reach, marketing opportunities, public relations strategy, and visitor research efforts

# fy25 recap of successes

- Visitor Spending increased by 8.2%, food and beverage revenues by 7.7%, lodging revenues by 11.9%
- Collaborated with Foster Relations to develop a crisis communication plan
- Developed and completed a 5 year strategic plan for Explore Ridgeland
- Utilized ARPA Grant I funding to expand the footprint of Ridgeland’s advertising reach, marketing opportunities, public relations strategy, and visitor research efforts
- Produced new videos and images that significantly expanded our marketing efforts
- Led a year-over-year increase resulting in 79K+ social media engagements and 6.6M impressions across platforms
- Successfully collaborated with the City of Ridgeland to pass the Freedom Ridge Park Sports Complex Expansion Bill
- Partnered with the Keep Ridgeland Beautiful Committee to develop and unveil the Wildflower Pavilion and new public art at the Ridgeland Wildflower Field and Art Park
- Collaborated with public and private partners to enhance events and tourism projects such as Ridgeland’s Inaugural Pecan Festival and National Folk Festival
- Successfully renewed the city’s Bronze-Level Bicycle Friendly Community designation from the League of American Cyclists, in partnership with the City of Ridgeland and the Bicycle Advisory Committee
- Completed the second year of the Explore Ridgeland Bikeshare Program, recording around 400 rides covering approximately 3,600 miles, with riders from across Mississippi, the US, and aboard
- Maintained the Ridgeland event sponsorship program
- Supported 7 new events to boost festival attendance and overnight visitation
- Launched the Explore Ridgeland Extranet to improve communication with lodging partners
- Hosted Hospitality Training Lunch and Learns that fostered connection and collaboration
- Celebrated four internal staff promotions, reflecting the team’s growth and dedication to advancing our mission
- Received recognition from USA Today for: Renaissance Euro Fest Ranked #6 in 10 Best Readers’ Choice Awards for Best Car Show, Natchez Trace Parkway Ranked #2 in Best Readers’ Choice Awards for Best Scenic Drive
- Chris Chapman, former President & CEO, received recognition at the 2025 Mississippi Governor’s Conference on Tourism for Terry Watkins Member of the Year
- Achieved recognition at the 2024 Mississippi Governor’s Conference on tourism for:
  - a. Destination Marketing Organization of the Year, Explore Ridgeland
  - b. Tourism Investment of the Year, David Conn/4 Top Hospitality
  - c. Tourism Partnership of the Year, The Ridgeland Wildflower Field & Art Park
  - d. Tourism Lodging of the Year, AC Marriott Ridgeland

# SWOT analysis

S

- Only Top Golf in MS
- Development of Ridgeland Eco Park
- Lily Pad Café opened, employing individuals with disabilities
- Passed Law for Airbnb cabin rental taxes
- High quality of life
- Fast growing area for economic growth
- Ample job opportunity
- Proximity to capital city
- Award winning city leadership and support
- Award winning DMO
- Barnett Reservoir is featured on Mississippi Crappie Trail
- Free bike share program
- Central location and proximity to the airport
- Opening of new hotel, Tru by Hilton
- Renovations at Embassy & Towneplace Suites
- Healthiest hometown
- High Crappie catch rate
- 33,000-acre water feature
- Located right off National Scenic Byway, Natchez Trace Parkway, the state's only National Park
- Freedom Ridge Expansion
- Premier shopping & dining establishments
- MS Craft Center & artistic community
- Modern Visitor Center is visible from interstate
- Only AC Marriott and Embassy Suites in MS
- Only BMX Track in MS
- Outdoor offerings include 21 trails and 4 parks
- Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly Community

**Strengths**

W

- Need wayfinding signage for cyclist's safety
- Hospitality workforce limitations
- Lack of convention, meeting, & event space
- Lack of parking on Jackson Street
- Lack of resources for fishing and water sports
- Lack of relationship with National Park Rangers
- Landlocked
- Limited booking space of sports facilities
- Limited night-life/live music offerings
- Parkway Information Cabin is "inhabitable"
- Lack of holiday attractions and offerings

**Weaknesses**

O

- Expansion of fishing/water sports tourism ROI
- Grow partnerships with CATA members
- Introduce the idea of creating a kayak rental launch spot on the Reservoir
- Larger sports tournaments
- New and unique events
- New business developments including Ridgeland Performing Arts Center
- Possible conference center development
- Shopping and entertainment developments
- Tourism Recovery Grants & America 250 Grants
- Ridgeland Ambassador Program
- Become a Certified Autism Destination through the Champion Autism Network
- Assess our destination with Wheel the World to provide a more accessible visitor experience
- Expanding public art trail
- Great Mississippi Nature Trail
- Growing visitor demand for nightlife and evening entertainment
- Expanding sports tourism market offering higher ROI potential
- Increasing recreational interest in accessible waterfront experiences

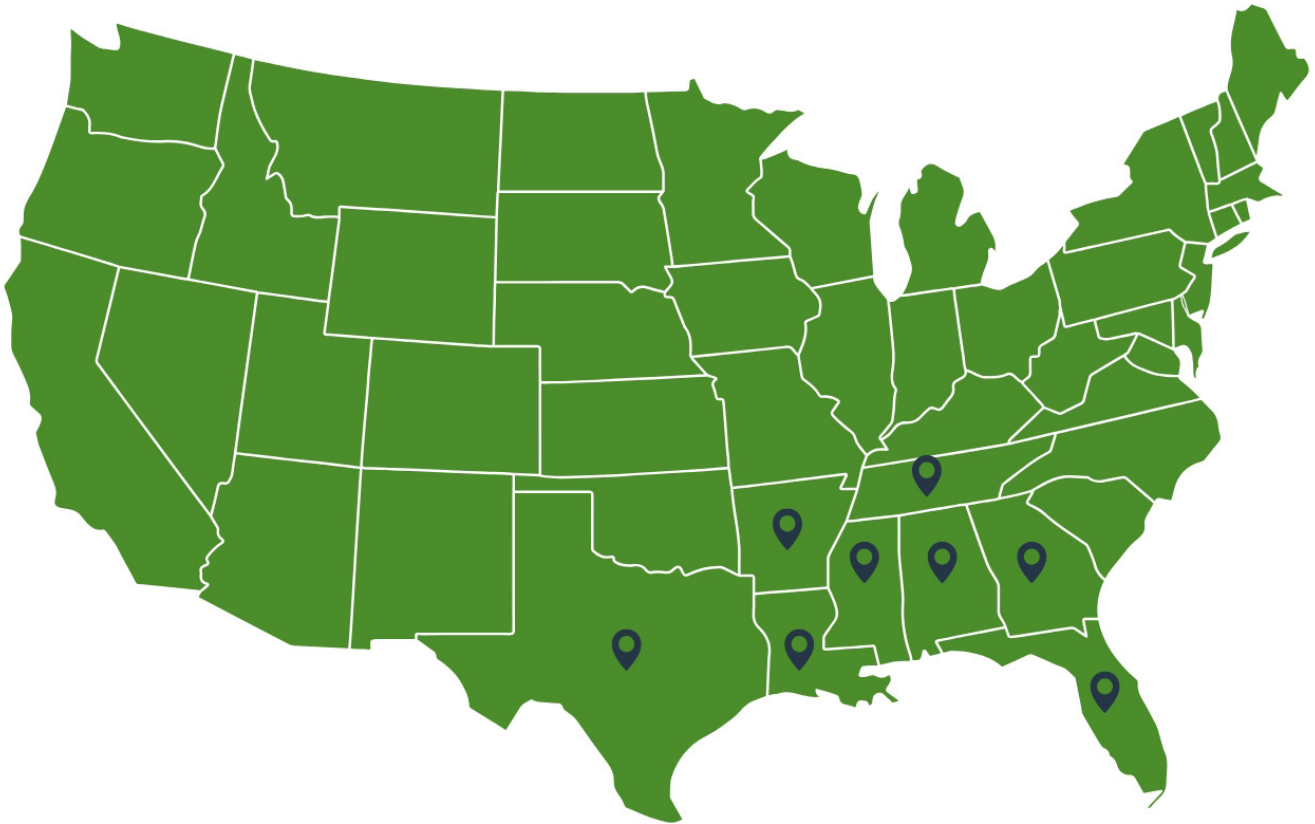
**Opportunities**

T

- Competitors financial resources in larger cities
- Expanded sports facility development outside of Ridgeland
- Growth of surrounding lodging properties
- Increased blight/empty stores along County Line Road
- Tourism development in surrounding counties
- Entertainment districts outside of Ridgeland

**Threats**

# top feeder states



**Mississippi**

**Louisiana**

**Texas**

**Alabama**

**Tennessee**

**Florida**

**Georgia**

**Arkansas**

*Source: Symphony by Tourism Economics*

# ridgeland visitors



## TRAVEL PARTY

Average Travel Party Size: 2.5

Average Travel Party Size for Leisure: 2.8

Average Travel Party Size for Business: 2.0

## OVERNIGHT STAYS

Average Length of Stay: 1.9 days

Overnight Visitors: 78.5%

## WHO THEY ARE

Age: 47

Household Income: \$70k

Median Income: \$58k

Repeat Visitors: 49%



Source: Symphony by Tourism Economics

# niche sales markets



## SPORTS & OUTDOORS

Ridgeland provides abundant opportunities for active lifestyles, appealing to both residents and visitors. The 33,000-acre Barnett Reservoir offers fishing, boating, and lakeside recreation, while the scenic Natchez Trace Parkway and Ridgeland's extensive biking trails provide miles of routes ideal for hiking and cycling. Old Trace Park is a prime location for community gatherings; Friendship Park, Freedom Ridge Park, and Wolcott Park serve as premier sports venues hosting local to national tournaments. The planned Freedom Ridge Park expansion will further strengthen Ridgeland's sports tourism infrastructure and economic impact.



## LEISURE TRAVEL

Whether for a vacation or a weekend getaway, today's travelers seek destinations that offer convenience, variety, and comfort. Explore Ridgeland promotes the city's well-rounded mix of experiences that meet these expectations – from upscale shopping and exceptional dining to rejuvenating spa services. Complementing these amenities are 15 conveniently located hotel properties that provide visitors with the perfect balance of rest and relaxation, ensuring an enjoyable and seamless stay.



## MEETINGS & GROUPS

Hosting a family reunion, wedding, or business meeting in Ridgeland offers the perfect blend of small-town charm and big-city convenience. Explore Ridgeland's Group Guide provides valuable resources to help planners identify desired venues, lodging options, and event services customized to their needs. We invite visitors and locals alike to explore Ridgeland's shops and boutiques in advance to find unique touches and essentials that make every occasion memorable.



## EVENTS

Explore Ridgeland proudly supports and sponsors a variety of annual events that draw participants and visitors to the community. Our objective is to strengthen the economic impact and overall success of established events while identifying new opportunities that align with Ridgeland's growing assets and venues. By attracting a diverse mix of events, we aim to increase year-round occupancy and revenue for local hotels, restaurants, and businesses.

# sports & outdoors

Ridgeland offers some of Mississippi's premier cycling, baseball, softball, tennis, pickleball, soccer, volleyball, disc golf, running/walking, hiking, fishing, and boating venues. Ridgeland is proud to host many state, regional, and national competitions.

## **Sales Strategy #1:**

Identify and pursue sporting/outdoor events that leverage Ridgeland's strengths, emphasizing facility development, expanded races and tournaments, overnight stays, and weekend visitation, especially in cycling, running, pickleball, and water sports.

## **Strategic Goal:**

Increase the number of sporting events and outdoor activities held in Ridgeland to drive participants and guests to stay overnight in a Ridgeland hotel.

## **Tactics:**

- Maintain and grow working relationship with Ridgeland Recreation and Parks, Ridgeland Tennis Center, Barnett Reservoir Foundation, Pearl River Valley Water Supply, and other outdoor/sports partners.
- Attend sports conferences that enhance Ridgeland's visibility as a sports destination such as Big Dam Bridge and TEAMS Conference and keep watch for new sports tourism opportunities.
- Continue to support and work with the MS High School Activities Association and the Mid-South Association of Independent Schools to promote Ridgeland as a destination for high school sports.
- Elevate Ridgeland's profile as a premier cycling destination by promoting its designation as a Bronze-Level Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists.
- Sustain and promote the Explore Ridgeland Bikeshare Program.
- Continue memberships and participate in industry associations such as Adventure Cycling, Bicycle Tour Network Association, and League of American Cyclists.
- Sponsor and support organizations putting on outdoor sporting events such as the City of Ridgeland Recreation and Parks, Tri County Mountain Bike Association, Magnolia Ridgeland BMX, Southern Bowling Congress, Fleet Feet Ridgeland, The Lily Pad Foundation, USTA Tennis, The Club at The Township at Colony Park, EKS Management, Magnolia Crappie Club, MHSAA, among many others.



# leisure travel

With abundant entertainment, outdoor adventures, premier local shopping, exquisite dining, and exciting year-round events, Ridgeland is the ideal destination for any occasion.

## Sales Strategy #2:

Focus on targeted initiatives, collaboration with local businesses, and leveraging Ridgeland's unique assets. Target nearby areas like Jackson, Memphis, and New Orleans, that can drive weekend and short-stay visits.

## Strategic Goal:

Enhance integrated sales, marketing, and communications strategies and resources to increase leisure visitation by showcasing Ridgeland's exceptional dining, shopping, and outdoor exploration.

## Tactics

- Work with partners to create new packages with themed itineraries and signature event weekends.
- Attend consumer trade shows with Visit Mississippi to promote Ridgeland.
- Research and pursue opportunities to participate in new consumer trade shows/events that would allow Explore Ridgeland to gain exposure in our top feeder states.



# meetings & groups

In Ridgeland, business and pleasure go hand in hand. Smart planners turn to Explore Ridgeland's visitor services to make their small meetings, weddings, and reunions both seamless and memorable, with hotels and venues that provide the perfect setting for any occasion.

## **Sales Strategy #3:**

Prioritize targeted outreach, partnership development, and value proposition enhancement.

## **Strategic Goal:**

Work to Strengthen Ridgeland's small meetings market by engaging and cultivating relationships within SMERF (social, military, educational, religious, and fraternal), corporate, tour and travel, and the wedding sector.

## **Tactics:**

- Continue memberships and participate in industry associations including American Bus Association, Mississippi Society of Association Executives, Ridgeland/Madison Rotary Club, Southeast Tourism Society, South Central Motor Coach Association, Tennessee Motor Coach Association, and Mississippi Tourism Association, among others.
- Refresh existing itineraries for each target market and develop new ones to attract and inspire additional groups to choose Ridgeland through sales and marketing team collaboration.
- Service the needs of event planners by providing welcome bags with Visitor Guide and maps, registration name badges, itinerary planning and spouse programs, room block, and non-room block rebate programs.
- Send thank you letters along with survey to meeting planners following their meeting/gathering.
- Continue to track lost business due to lack of meeting and convention space to possible future development of a meeting/convention facility in Ridgeland.



# annual events

Explore Ridgeland is a proud host and sponsor of a variety of events that bring visitors to enjoy our city. We work to evaluate the economic impact and success of events that we sponsor through our Event Sponsorship Program.

The program includes an application and report for each sponsored event. We are always on the lookout for opportunities to bring new and exciting events to Ridgeland.

## Sales Strategy #4:

Support and help grow events that fuel Ridgeland's economy and elevate its profile as a leading destination by enhancing the Event Sponsorship Program and pursuing new, brand-aligned opportunities.

## Strategic Goal:

Focus on proactive event recruitment, strategic partnerships, comprehensive support, and data-driven decision making.

## SPRING

- Crossroads of the South Tennis Tournament
- Dragon Boat Regatta
- Dixie National Rodeo
- Leap 4 the Lily Pad
- MHSAA/MAAA Soccer State Championship
- Mississippi State Closed Championship Tennis
- Natchez Trace Century Ride
- Pepsi Pops
- Providence Hill Cup
- Ridgeland Tourism Spring Closed Championship Tennis
- Ridgeland, MS USTA L5 Jr. Singles & Mixed Tournament
- The Club Spring Pickleball Challenge
- Township Jazz Festival
- USTA Jr. Team Spring State Championship

## FALL

- Capital Transport Jr. Open Tennis Tournament
- Cycle Out Kids Cancer Bike Ride
- Fat Tire Festival & McGee Lungbuster
- Mayor's Fun Walk
- Ridgeland Pecan Festival
- Mississippi Combo Doubles Tennis Championship
- Mississippi Moving Day
- Renaissance Euro Fest
- The Club Fall Pickleball Challenge
- Trunk or Treat
- USTA Jr. Team Tennis Fall State

## SUMMER

- 18 & Over Tennis Championships
- Mag Ridge BMX Gold Cup Qualifier
- Mississippi Clay Court Open Championships
- Celebrate America Balloon Glow
- Comic Con
- Father & Child Fishing Tournament
- Ridgeland Tourism Summer Open Tennis Tournament
- Southern Bowling Congress
- State Games of Mississippi Ultimate Flying Disc Tournament
- Summer Sizzler
- USTA Jr. Team Tennis Summer State Championship

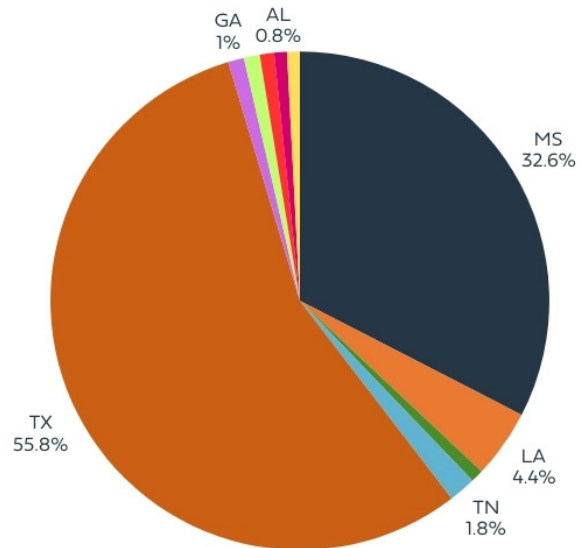
## WINTER

- Chimneyville Arts Festival
- Christmas on the Green
- Ridgeland Christmas Parade
- Ridgeland Christmas Tree Lighting
- The Township Holiday Open House
- Turkey Day 8K and ¼ mile Turkey Trot
- USTA Mississippi High School Classic

# visitor services

## Top Visitors by State in FY25

644 Walk ins  
4,124 Welcome Bags  
4,980 Leads



### Tactics:

- Promote, educate, and engage the local community and travelers to utilize the variety of services Explore Ridgeland offers.
- Provide activities to increase and document foot traffic into the Visitor Center, including indoor and outdoor kiosks.
- Fulfill Visitor Center in-market services for meetings, events, weddings, and reunions.
- Provide planning assistance and interactive itineraries to engage visitors to stay, dine, and meet in Ridgeland.
- Provide up-to-date tourism information and maintain inventory for guests, travelers, and locals.



# visitor services continued

Be sure to take advantage of our complimentary group services to ensure your tournament or event is a win-win:

**Lodging Assistance:** Our sales and events staff will be happy to generate a lodging lead to all hotel properties that meet your requirements.

**Lodging Rebate Programs:** Groups with a confirmed room block of at least five rooms and 10 minimum room nights paid at a Ridgeland hotel are eligible for a reimbursement rate of \$4 per room night. Groups that do not have a reserved room block and have attendees booking individual rooms can receive reimbursement on the number of recorded room nights tracked.

## Welcome Bags & Name Badges:

We offer eco-friendly Explore Ridgeland bags and name badges upon request. Must call the Visitors Center two weeks prior to event to receive welcome bag

**Visitors Guides:** Here you'll find a complete list of attractions, restaurants, annual events, and more to ensure you are in the know about all the great things Ridgeland has to offer.

## Welcome Letters:

We're happy to include a personal welcome letter from Ridgeland's mayor for your group.



**Itinerary Planning:** Let us assist you in planning your event by creating customized itineraries featuring local attractions and restaurants.

**Event Sponsorship Program:** The goal of this program is to help fund the promotion of events that attract visitors to Ridgeland hotels and restaurants. Recipients of this program are not eligible for the Lodging Rebate Programs. To submit an application, visit [exploreRidgeland.com/groups-meetings/sponsorship-program/](http://exploreRidgeland.com/groups-meetings/sponsorship-program/).

**Media Hub:** Access our logo, photo, and video assets on our website at [exploreRidgeland.com/media](http://exploreRidgeland.com/media).

# marketing

The marketing and communications team targets specific audiences through print, digital, and social media advertising efforts, as well as public relations initiatives, to encourage brand awareness and ultimately drive travel related spending.

## FY25 in Review

- Completed and executed ARPA I funding in accordance with state and federal procurement guidelines.
- Continued monthly e-newsletter communication to our industry partners.
- Introduced niche newsletters targeting visitors interested in cycling, fishing, and leisure offerings.
- Continued partnering with Tourism Economics to enhance research efforts and gather data.
- Continued regular advertising placements and asset fulfillment for all print, digital, and broadcast placements.
- Continued ARPA II program of work through creative assets and marketing campaigns.
- Continued developing a collection of on-brand promotional materials to promote attractions and events.
- Engaged with visitors through content marketing, influencer collaborations, and user-generated content.
- Further developed the Ridgeland Scarecrow Trail to create a seasonal roadside attraction.
- Hosted travel media and increased public relations strategic efforts.
- Launched a romance/wedding planning campaign.
- Marketed website homepage to specific geo-fenced in-state and out-of-state audiences through Bound 360.
- Partnered with local hotels, restaurants, boutiques, and attractions on social media to reach a wider audience.
- Amelia Dalton earned her Tourism Marketing Professional (TMP) credentials upon graduating from Southeast Tourism Society's three-year Marketing College program.
- Promoted Amelia Dalton, TMP to Creative Director.
- Spearheaded a marketing internship program.
- Spearheaded the Wild About Ridgeland Business Challenge, a local initiative that encouraged business owners to enhance storefront aesthetics in alignment with the summer bloom of the Ridgeland Wildflower Field and Art Park, while educating visitors about the area's unique roadside attraction.
- Strengthened the destination's brand through consistent messaging and visuals across all platforms.
- Used social media analytics and visitor data to assess the impact of marketing campaigns.
- Worked with agencies to capture and develop new creative asset materials.
- Hosted influencers and travel writers.
- Secured earned media.

# marketing continued

## Marketing Strategy:

Explore Ridgeland will position the city as a premier upscale dining and culinary destination by showcasing its chef-driven restaurants, refined atmosphere, and elevated food and beverage experiences. Through consistent branding, high-quality storytelling, and targeted digital marketing, the strategy will emphasize Ridgeland's unique blend of sophistication and Southern charm.

## Strategic Goal:

The primary goals are to increase awareness of Ridgeland as an upscale Mississippi culinary destination, attract food-focused and affluent visitors, and drive visitation that supports local restaurants and hospitality partners. This strategy aims to strengthen brand recognition, increase engagement with dining-related content, extend visitor stays, and reinforce Ridgeland's reputation as a must-visit destination for elevated dining experiences.

## Tactics:

- Develop high-quality photo and video content highlighting signature dishes, cocktails, chefs, and dining atmospheres .
- Feature chef spotlights, restaurant stories, and seasonal menus through owned and earned media .
- Launch targeted digital advertising campaigns aimed at food enthusiasts and regional drive markets .
- Partner with local restaurants and hotels to promote curated culinary experiences and events .
- Maintain consistent upscale culinary branding across all digital and print platforms.
- Utilize social media to showcase behind-the-scenes content and immersive dining experiences .
- Track performance metrics and visitor feedback to refine messaging, creative assets, and audience targeting .
- Launch Digital Passports in partnership with Bandwango and Visit Mississippi to create an immersive experience for visitors and locals alike .
- Use branded merchandise and collateral such as brochures, guides, and customized items .
- Implement SEO and AEO strategies to increase visibility and traffic to our website .
- Continue creating branded user-generated content for social media including reels, stories, and photos that showcase Ridgeland's attractions, events, and businesses.



# public relations

## Public Relations Strategy:

Use integrated marketing and communication tactics to position Ridgeland as a leading culinary destination through credible storytelling, chef-driven narratives, and immersive sensory experiences. The strategy prioritizes earned authority and long-term brand equity over one-time exposure. By elevating chefs, restauranters, and signature dining moments through national and regional media, experiential press opportunities, and optimized owned content. The strategy is designed to outlast ARPA funding by producing evergreen content, media relationships, and narrative frameworks.

## Strategic Goal:

Establish Ridgeland as a distinctive, credible culinary destination known for its steakhouses, chef talent, and full-sensory dining experiences, driving awareness, visitation, and community pride while building long-term reputational value.

## Tactics

- Pitch national and regional culinary, travel, and lifestyle media.
- Develop chef profiles highlighting James Beard nominated and emerging talent.
- Host immersive travel and food writer press trips built around the culinary campaign.
- Secure podcast guest placements for chefs and Explore Ridgeland President & CEO.
- Pursue regional and national broadcast segments (morning shows, lifestyle programming) tied to seasonal themes and events.
- Create seasonal PR narratives aligned with monthly themes.
- Support signature moments such as anniversaries, festivals, National Steakhouse Month and Week, and trail launches with targeted media outreach.
- Build optimized chef profiles, culinary trail pages, and landing pages for SEO and AEO.
- Leverage earned placements for link-building to strengthen long-term search authority.
- Develop board and stakeholder-ready PR recaps demonstrating campaign impact and value.
- Encourage grassroots advocacy by turning locals, hospitality partners, and chefs into brand ambassadors.
- Coordinate closely with paid, shared, and owned teams to amplify earned wins across social, email, and website channels.



# where you'll see us



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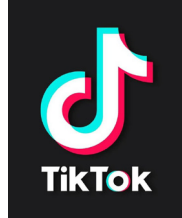
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taste of the south



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