

PUTTING VISITORS BACK ON THE TRACKS: A LOOK AT TOURIST RAIL OPTIONS FOR THE MYRTLE BEACH AREA

ABSTRACT

The Myrtle Beach area is a popular drive-to vacation destination. Originally, the railroad delivered visitors to Myrtle Beach over 115 years ago. In 2011, rail service disappeared in the region. In 2016, a new owner re-established freight rail service to the area. This manuscript examines the possibility of using this short-haul rail line to develop passenger rail as a tourist attraction for the over 16 million visitors annually to the Myrtle Beach area.

INTRODUCTION

Myrtle Beach is the heart of “The Grand Strand” ... a 60-mile stretch of beaches running from Little River, SC to Georgetown, SC. The region welcomes approximately 16 million visitors annually. Consistent with its positioning as a family destination, 61% of visitors are families that stay, on average, 6 days in the area. During their stays, these visitors dine in over 1,900 restaurants, stay in some 100,000 hotels and condo rooms, and enjoy 100+ golf courses, 46 mini-golf courses, 9 musical theaters, 6 major indoor or outdoor shopping areas, as well as a large and complex assortment of nationally-known attractions and amusements (Myrtle Beach Area Statistical Abstract, 24th edition, 2015).

That’s the Myrtle Beach of today. Here is a brief description of the original commercial development of the Myrtle Beach Area (Myrtle Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau 2018):

“Until the 1900s, the beaches of Horry County were virtually uninhabited due to the county's geographical inaccessibility and poor economy. Near the turn of the century, the Burroughs & Collins Company - a timber / turpentine firm with extensive beachfront holdings - began developing the Myrtle Beach area as a resort. In 1901, the company built the beach's first hotel, the Seaside Inn. At that time, oceanfront lots sold for \$25, and buyers received an extra lot if they built a house valued at \$500 or more. Previously known as Long Bay, Withers, or Withers Big Swamp, the fledgling beach community was simply called "New Town" - until the Horry Herald sponsored a contest to officially name the area. Mrs. F.E. Burroughs - wife of the founder of Burroughs & Collins - won with the name "Myrtle Beach," which she chose for the many wax myrtle trees growing wild along the shore.”

Early access to the community (and its first hotel, the Seaside Inn) was via a railroad developed by the Burroughs & Collins Company. Today, over 90% of visitors travel by automobile to the Grand Strand (Myrtle Beach Area Statistical Abstract, 24th edition, 2015). And, ironically, these visitors often enter Myrtle Beach via Highway 501 ... which parallels the original railroad line that delivered visitors to the region over 115 years ago.

Railways that used to move people to the beach now move freight for area manufacturers. The purpose of this manuscript is to examine the possibility of re-introducing passenger rail service

to the Grand Strand. Specifically, the opportunity to develop train service as an entertainment attraction in-and-of-itself will be explored. First, the importance of the railroad in the founding and development of the Grand Strand is discussed. Second, the re-establishment of rail service by R.J. Corman (by their purchase of Carolina Southern Railroad) is outlined, along with the opportunity for Corman to develop tourist rail services similar to some the company operates in other markets. Finally, the common categories of such trains are reviewed and their possible fit along the Grand Strand is evaluated.

RAIL SERVICE ALONG THE GRAND STRAND

As noted above, the development of rail service was instrumental in the development of Myrtle Beach as a vacation destination. The rail line allowed the traversing of rivers and swamps to reach the beach. The South Carolina History Trail (2018) describes the development in the following way:

“In the late 19th century, vacationers from Conway and other parts of Horry County reached the beach along a circuitous route, usually traveling by steamboat downriver to a landing inland of the beach, then making the rest of the trip by wagon or buggy. In 1900, the first train from Conway reached New Town, as Myrtle Beach was first called. It was pulled by a second-hand logging locomotive called Black Maria, and the train cars had originally served New York City's elevated tram line.”

“The railroad had been built from Conway toward the beach by the Burroughs and Collins Company, a local timber and mercantile firm, in order to harvest the timber east of Conway. As almost an afterthought, the company extended the line to the beach and developed a modest beach resort that consisted of a company-owned hotel, the Seaside Inn, a pavilion-style dance house, a bathhouse and a beachside boardwalk. The tiny, turn-of-the-century beach resort was the vision of the company's founder, Franklin G. Burroughs, a Confederate veteran and gifted businessman who had died in 1897. Before his death, he reportedly took a stroll on the empty beach and made a prediction: “I won't live to see it...,” he observed, “but someday this whole strand will be a resort.”

The rail, a single track (Class III) short-line, would continue to be an important means of moving large freight in-and-out of the Grand Strand for many years. However, passenger rail service (both locally and nationally) declined with the growth of a national highway system, the automobile, and low-cost air travel. Consequently, rail companies put their primary resources into freight service.

CSX provided freight rail service in the area until 1987 when they sold approximately 90 miles of its track to the newly-created Mid-Atlantic Railroad. The company was later purchased by Carolina Southern Railroad in 1995. The line operated with a connection to CSX in Mullins, SC with service North and East to Chadbourn, NC, and South to Conway and Myrtle Beach, SC (South Carolina State Rail Plan, 2008). During its full operations, the principal commodities carried included coal, aggregates, wallboard steel and lumber. And, its principal shippers included

Santee Cooper, Martin Marietta, Canfor Southern Pine, Metglas, Atlantic Paper, Idaho Timber, Georgia-Pacific and Southern States Cooperative. At that time, these firms employ nearly 2,000 local workers (Lowenstein, 2012).

In 2011, the Federal Railroad Administration declared some of the bridges used by Carolina Southern Railroad to be unsafe. At that time, the owners said they could not afford to make the necessary investments in line upgrades. After efforts to secure grant funding were unsuccessful, the rail line ceased to operate. Fearful of the impact that the loss of rail service would have on their communities, officials in Marion and Horry (SC), and Columbus (NC) counties began a legal fight to force the owners to abandon the line to make possible its sale or transfer. The newly-formed two-state rail committee was then tasked with finding a possible buyer (Long, 2015). In the end, finding a suitable buyer effectively resolved the legal dispute with the former owners.

R.J. CORMAN PURCHASES THE CAROLINA SOUTHERN RAILROAD

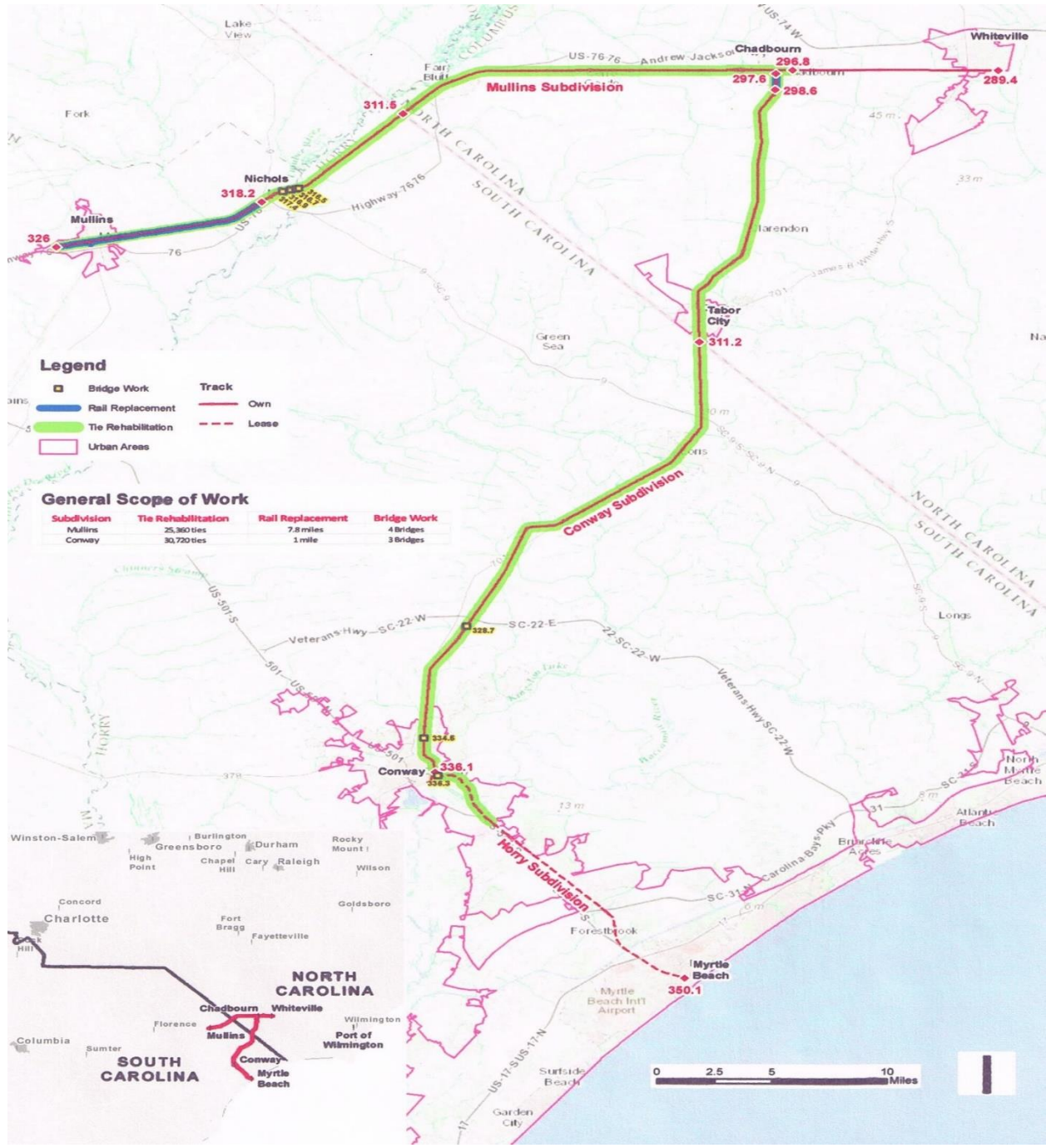
R.J. Corman, one of the nation's premier rail operators, purchased the assets of the Carolina Southern Railroad in Summer 2015 and resumed freight rail services to the region in April 2016 under the rail name "Carolina Lines (RJCS)." R.J. Corman is a fully vertically-integrated rail group including its own rail construction, maintenance, locomotive/rail car development, emergency derailment and signals, and virtually every aspect of necessary railroad materials and service. It has one of the best safety records in the industry and has received the Jake Award of the American Short Line Railroad Association for distinguished record in safety (R.J. Corman, 2018a). In fact, Corman was awarded the 2018 Platinum Award by the National Railroad Construction and Maintenance Association for its 100% score in their assessment of workplace safety programs among railroad companies (R.J. Corman, 2018b).

Founded in 1973 in Nicholasville, Kentucky by the late Richard J. Corman, the company employs over 1,400 employees operating in field offices located in 22 states. Here is a brief description of their operations from the company's website (R.J. Corman, 2018a).

"Today, the R. J. Corman Railroad Group, LLC serves all seven North American major railroads, many regional and shortline railroads and dozens of industries having rail. Services include owning and operating eleven shortlines, providing emergency rail services associated with derailments and natural disasters, switching, track construction, track material distribution, signal design/construction, building switching locomotives and operating a dinner train."

Given R.J. Corman's operational focus on shortline railways and capacity integration with all seven major rail operators (BNSF Railway, CN, Canadian Pacific, CSX Transportation, Kansas City Southern, Norfolk Southern, and Union Pacific), they can connect local manufacturers to national and international buyers and suppliers. Locally, R.J. Corman connects with the CSX Railroad in Mullins, SC. **FIGURE ONE** shows a map of the Corman's Carolina Line.

FIGURE ONE – MAP OF CAROLINA LINE FOOTPRINT



The Opportunity to Develop Tourist Rail Services along the Grand Strand

R.J. Corman currently maintains a Dinner Train Excursion division operating the “My Kentucky Home Dinner Train.” This aspect of the company is an adjunct to the more profitable freight operations and is done much as a public service on essentially a break-even to slight-loss basis. Additional themed trains on the Dinner Train line include Murder Mysteries, Bourbon Excursions and the North Pole Express (R.J. Corman, 2018a). While R.J. Corman’s primary focus has been restoring full freight service at Class III levels (which allows freight trains to travel up to 40 miles per hour) and developing additional business through economic development, it has pledged to eventually bring in limited dining/tourism-related train runs to the region, especially during the high tourist season (May – October).

POSSIBLE FORMATS FOR TOURISM RAIL SERVICE

Collectively, all tourist trains offer a nostalgic experience, a connection to the past, and the opportunity to experience breathtaking scenery (American Rails, 2018). In addition to the actual railway and locomotive equipment, the focus of such attractions can be divided into five categories:

1. Highlighting Local Scenery
2. Highlighting Local Food and Beverages
3. Celebrating Local History
4. Showcasing Theater and Performance Art
5. Special Occasion Rail Excursions

Illustrative examples of each tourist rail category are provided below.

Highlighting Local Scenery

The Cape Cod Central Railroad (Hyannis MA) describes its excursion trains in the following way (Cape Cod Railroad, 2018), “We invite you to get up close with the hidden beauty of the Cape aboard the Cape Cod Central Railroad! Our classic two-hour excursion ride brings passengers up close and personal with the beauty of the Cape including woodlands, sand dunes, cranberry bogs, salt marshes and the famous Cape Cod Canal.” Similarly, the Great Smokey Mountain Railroad (2018) “will take you on a memorable journey through a remote and beautiful corner of North Carolina. Ride with us into river gorges, across valleys and through tunnels carved out of majestic mountains.” And, the Strasburg Rail Road (2018) prides itself as “America's Oldest Short-line Railroad” as it “steams along amid the Amish farmlands of Pennsylvania Dutch Country.” To be clear, most such tourist trains provide some sort of food and beverage service. However, the scenery is the ‘main show.’

Highlighting Local Food and Beverages

One of the most well-known tourist trains is the Napa Valley Wine Train. For the past 25 years, guests have been treated to food and wine pairings that showcase the cuisine and wines of the Napa Valley during its 36-mile round trip which takes about 3 hours (Wine Train, 2018). While the train passes historic wineries such as Robert Mondavi, Beringer, and V. Sittui, the food and wine highlight the travel experience.

R.J. Corman operates the “My Kentucky Dinner Train” based in Bardstown, KY. Bardstown is the capital of “Bourbon Country”, a collection of bourbon-related distilleries, tours, and museums. In fact, the train route includes passing the Jim Beam Distillery in Clermont, KY. A full bar service is available while diners enjoy such Kentucky favorites as Kentucky Hot Brown Sandwiches for lunch and Bourbon Pecan Pie for desert (Kentucky Dinner Train, 2018).

It must be noted that it is not necessary for all food and beverages highlighted to be deemed ‘local treats.’ For example, the Essex Steam Train (2018) “offers a night of refined pleasures on our popular Cigar & Whiskey Cruise designed for adults only.” The Cincinnati Dinner Train (2018) provides a formal 4-course dining experience for their guests. The menu does not include, for example, Cincinnati-style chili, German favorites Sauerbraten or Red Sauerkraut (in homage to the large local German heritage), or Graeter’s Ice Cream.

Celebrating Local History

The Verde Canyon Railroad (Clarksdale, AZ) follows Arizona's "Wilderness Route" while show-casing local history in the form of Indian ruins, rare wildlife and rugged canyon landscapes (Verde Canyon Railroad, 2018). Visitors to Oak Ridge, TN can board the Secret City Scenic Excursion Train and see the once secret complex where the atomic bomb was developed (i.e., the Manhattan Project) (Secret City Scenic Excursion Train, 2018). Not far away in Chattanooga, TN, rail riders pass through a Civil War era tunnel (Tennessee Valley Railroad, 2018).

Showcasing Theater and Performance Art

The Seminole Gulf Railway (Fort Myers, FL) provides the Murder Mystery Dinner Train. Here, guests enjoy a 5-course meal while trying to “unravel a comical mystery before your eyes. It is up to you to decide just who the killer is and why they would do such a dastardly deed.” (Seminole Gulf Railway, 2018).

In May 2016, the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad partnered with WAMU (Public Radio Station, American University) to provide a scenic tour of Western Maryland hosted WAMU’s Bluegrass Country radio hosts and music by the DelFest All-Stars (WAMU’s Bluegrass Train, 2016). The Rio Grande Scenic Railroad does seasonal trips to Fir Summit Amphitheater, an outdoor concert venue in Fort Garland, Colorado. The Mountain Rails Live tour for July 2017 was described as follows, “Come see how the west was sung. Mountain Rails Live concert series is our idea of a perfect Colorado summer day by combining train rides with great live music performances. We’ve designed our mountaintop concert site to perfectly complement the natural

acoustics of a natural meadow amphitheater powered by clean Rocky Mountain sun and wind. Ride once and you'll be a believer!" (Rio Grande Scenic Railroad, 2018).

Special Occasion Rail Excursions

Many of the aforementioned tourist trains run special occasion excursions to provide a unique experience for Valentine's Day, Easter, Halloween (including ghosts, haunted stories, etc.), Fall Foliage, Polar Express (Christmas), Thomas the Tank Engine, and other events. For example, the Chehalis-Centralia Railroad (in Chehalis, Washington) will run a Mother's Day Brunch Train in 2018 (Chehalis-Centralia Railroad, 2018). The Sacramento RiverTrain will also provide a similar experience for Father's Day (Sacramento RiverTrain, 2018).

A review of tourist trains currently operating in the Southern United States (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) is provided in **TABLE ONE**.

TABLE ONE – TOURISM RAIL LINES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Name and Location	Description
Arkansas and Missouri Rail Springdale, Arkansas	The A&M hosts daytrippers on roundtrips to historic Van Buren. A second excursion continues from Van Buren to Winslow, clearing high trestles and a mountain tunnel on its awesome Ozark run.
Eureka Springs and North Arkansas Railroad Eureka Springs, Arkansas	Scenic Ozark Hills excursions and an active rail yard bring Arkansas's railroading heritage to life. A popular dining excursion is also scheduled. Highlights include exhibits of railroad memorabilia and a working roundtable.
Orange Blossom Cannonball Tavares, Florida	Florida's only operating steam train rolls through Central Florida's Lake Country. The Sunshine State's "movie train" has been featured in over 20 films and TV shows.
Seminole Golf Railway Fort Myers, Florida	A Gulf Coast favorite, this 3½-hour excursion treats guests to a five-course dinner prepared by an on-board chef, plus a live performance of a comical murder mystery, and scenic Caloosahatchee River crossing.
Blue Ridge Scenic Railway Blue Ridge, Georgia	Tracking the Toccoa River through the Chattahoochee National Forest, the train makes a sightseeing layover at the twin Appalachian villages of McCaysville, Georgia and Copperhill, Tennessee.
SAM Shortline Excursion Line Cordele, Georgia	Traveling through the rural countryside, stops include Georgia Veterans State Park, historic Americus, Habitat for Humanity Global Village and Plains... home of President Jimmy Carter.
Stone Mountain Scenic Railway Stone Mountain, Georgia	Open-air coaches offer excellent views of the Civil War Memorial relief carved into the mountain face. The railway is part of a theme park that features rides, entertainment and other attractions.
Big South Fork Scenic Railway Stearns, Kentucky	Within the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, along trackage once dedicated to hauling lumber and coal, trains descend the river gorge to the restored Blue Heron Mining Community.

Table One continued ...

Name and Location	Description
Bluegrass Scenic Railroad Versailles, Kentucky	Coaches from rail's golden age take passengers on a romantic excursion through the gorges and horse farms of Central Kentucky's Bluegrass Region. Railroadiana exhibits include a rare watchman's shanty and a working telegraph set.
My Old Kentucky Home Dinner Train Bardstown, Kentucky	Luncheon and dinner excursions depart historic Bardstown for a two-hour jaunt through the Kentucky heartland. Southern hospitality abounds aboard restored circa 1940s dining cars where fine cuisine and gracious service are standard.
Great Smoky Mountains Railway Bryson City, North Carolina	Vintage trainsets cross soaring Fontana Trestle with some continuing to spectacular Nantahala River Gorge. Separate Tuckasegee River excursions pass through historic Cowee Tunnel.
Tweetsie Railroad Blowing Rock, North Carolina	Named for the "tweet tweet" of its whistle and pulled by historic steam engine No. 12, the train does a 3mi (4km) turn through a wild west theme park. Highlights include rides, shows and a locomotive shop.
Secret City Excursion Train Oak Ridge, Tennessee	Departing a former Manhattan Project facility, this 12-mi (19-km) ride brings passengers face-to-face with the once secret complex where the atomic bomb was developed.
Tennessee Valley Railroad Chattanooga, Tennessee	In under an hour, guests ride through a Civil War tunnel and see a turntable rotate the locomotive for the return trip. A half-day round-trip to Chickamauga, Georgia includes a layover in the historic town.
Three Rivers Rambler Knoxville, Tennessee	Beyond Downtown Knoxville, the Rambler skirts farmland and abandoned quarry works to reach the "Three Rivers Trestle" where the French Broad and Holston Rivers join to form the Tennessee River.
James River Rambler Dillwyn, Virginia	Through the rolling hills and deep forests of Central Virginia, the Rambler's vintage diesels haul classic coaches along a heritage route. Highlights include open-air sightseeing cars.

Table One continued ...

Name and Location	Description
Cass Scenic Railroad State Park Cass, West Virginia	Popular 1½-hour steam excursions include a layover at a traditional loggers' camp. Separate half-day sightseer trips transport visitors to the top of Bald Knob, the third-highest summit in the Allegheny range.
Durbin and Greenbriar Valley Railroad Durbin, West Virginia	Several DGV trains explore the Cheat Mountain region. A 40's streamliner heads for High Falls via a remarkable S-curve tunnel... a unique rail bus scales "Cheat" to reach the falls... and a rare gear-driven steamer meanders through the valley below.
Potomac Eagle Scenic Railway Romney, West Virginia	Excursions follow the South Branch Potomac River past farm and forest and into "The Trough," a narrow and secluded mountain valley where, high above their natural habitat, American bald eagles soar.

Source: <http://www.traintraveling.com/usa/tourist-train-rides/index.html>

MATCHING THE GRAND STRAND TO THE EXISTING TRAIN EXCURSION TYPES

The previous section highlighted ‘generic’ options for tourist rail excursions. Now, we’ll take a look at how the attributes of the Grand Strand mesh with this list to determine the more-feasible train excursion types for the area.

Highlighting Local Scenery

The R.J. Corman Carolina Line runs the following course:

- **Myrtle Beach – Carolina Forest – Conway – Loris – Tabor City – Chadbourn – Whiteville**

And, at this time, the line is not yet operational from Carolina Forest to Myrtle Beach (but that could change in the future). The current footprint can best be described as a mix of commercial / residential / agricultural. A tourist rail could follow the Strasburg Rail Road model and highlight the agricultural region (Conway, Loris, Tabor, City, etc.) and open spaces. More likely, the scenery will not be the primary experiences for the visitor.

Highlighting Local Food and Beverages

The Napa Valley Wine Train highlights wines and cuisine that are well-identified with the Valley. Key foods in this area of the Carolinas include:

- Seafood Dishes
- Low Country Boil / Frogmore Stew (shrimp, sausage, corn, and potatoes)
- Shrimp and Grits
- Chicken Bog (rice, chicken, and sausage)
- Barbeque (pulled pork, ribs)

It is possible to highlight these dishes in a tourist rail dining experience. Further, the area boasts a number of wineries, breweries/brew pubs, and distilleries, including:

- **Wineries:** LaBelle Amie, Duplin, Carolina Vineyards Winery
- **Breweries:** Liberty Grill and Brew Pub, Gordon Biersch, and New South Brewing
- **Distilleries:** Palmetto Moonshine

So, it is possible showcase local beverages as well.

Celebrating Local History

As noted earlier, the rail footprint can best be described as a mix of commercial / residential / agricultural. Now, visitors could see first-hand cotton and tobacco growing in the fields. And, to be clear, the agricultural past is an important part of the region. However, the local history may not lend itself to being the focus of a tourist rail excursion for the area. But, clearly a tourist rail experience does evoke a sense of nostalgia for its guests.

Showcasing Theater and Performance Art

Beach music, dancing (particularly, the ‘Shag’), and musical theater are important elements of the local culture. Shows such as “Murder Mystery” or “Ghost Trains” may be well-received. And, with musical theaters (Carolina Opry, Alabama Theater, Legends in Concert) and Dinner Shows (Pirates Voyage, Medieval Times) in the region, there may be ample talent and partnerships available to develop applicable shows for a tourist rail excursion.

Special Occasion Rail Excursions

Myrtle Beach is a family destination frequented by over 16 million visitors per year. It is believed that children’s excursions (such as Thomas the Tank Engine) and family-friendly themed trains (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day), could work well here. And, special events (New Year’s Eve, Valentine’s Day, etc.) could be fruitful for development as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

R.J. Corman has experience in operating tourist trains in other markets. They have committed to examining the potential for such a train excursion in their newly-acquired Carolina Line once track improvements are made and industrial freight clients have their immediate needs addressed. In the pages above, the potential for such a tourist rail line has been examined. On the surface, it appears an interesting opportunity may exist for the company. Consider the following relationships:

- Tourist rail excursions offer **family-friendly entertainment**. Myrtle Beach is a family beach destination with 16 million visitors per year.
- Tourist rail excursions can be done as **seasonal offerings**. Myrtle Beach sees an uptick in visitor numbers in summer months.
- Tourist rail excursions offer a **nostalgic experience**. Myrtle Beach is home to many retirees (grandparents with grandchildren) and snowbirds (winter visitors) who are prime markets for such nostalgia tourist offerings.

The potential exists for the development of passenger rail as part of the tourism portfolio of the Grand Strand. Its development would provide an additional option for its 16 million visitors per year. This research may aid decision-makers as they contemplate this business opportunity and its strategic fit in the community.

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