

Bragging Rights

Dallas is becoming a city to be proud of, but residents are slow to notice.

LET'S FACE IT: WE HAVE AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX. WE don't think that much of ourselves as a region. This seems strange to say against the backdrop of outsiders' hugely antiquated and inaccurate impressions, especially those who have never visited Dallas-Fort Worth: big hats, big oil, big hair, and all that garbage. It also seems strange to say amid our perceived larger-than-life view of ourselves and our place in history. Fort Worth touts itself as the "Gateway to the West" and one of "America's Most Livable Communities." Dallas boasts a "city built on big dreams, freshly blazed trails, and an attitude that all things are possible." So why don't we tell people that?

I'm not talking about what our city leaders and convention bureaus are saying to outsiders about coming here for business. The fact is, we're fast on our way to earning back the distinction of the early 1990s when Dallas was one of the nation's top convention and meeting spots. We've climbed back to No. 8 recently, and we now have the fourth-largest concentration of *Fortune* 500 companies in the country.

I'm talking about what we say to our families, friends, and acquaintances. We're good, generally, when it comes to talking about how we love to live here—great weather, low cost of living—but we're not so good when it comes to encouraging those friends, families, and acquaintances to come here on vacation. That's where the inferiority complex comes in—we don't think of ourselves as a great leisure destination. And, as the summer vacation season is upon us, we're doing ourselves a disservice.

"We do a great job advertising outside trying to get people here. But we ourselves living here don't realize and appreciate all the things we have right here in our own backyard," says Laura Estrada, the former chairwoman of the city of Dallas' Cultural Affairs Commission and chair-elect for the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We need to brag to everyone we know a lot more often. We have so much to offer."

And apparently, despite our malaise, outsiders are recognizing that fact, too. According to a new State of the American Traveler survey by Destination Analysts Inc., Dallas ranked in the top 20 cities and destinations those interviewed would like to visit in the upcoming year. In fact, we ranked No. 14. Not bad at all, considering what we're up against. Not surprisingly, we were beat out by the likes of Las Vegas, New York City, Disneyland, and Yellowstone National Park. But when you consider those cities that ranked below Dallas—including Miami, New Orleans, and

Branson, Mo.—we should take serious notice.

"Most other destinations have one big thing—one big leisure attraction," says Arthur Hollingsworth, chairman of the board for the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Orlando has Disney World, Vegas has the casinos, Southern California has beaches. It's an easy message for those cities to communicate. Dallas has to communicate 30 different individual things."

Let's consider what those things are. At the top of the list are the very things those interviewed by the American Traveler survey listed when asked about our region: shopping and restaurants.

Dallas has the largest connected arts district in the country, while Fort Worth is home to museums second to none. Amusement parks, sports and entertainment, history—we've got it all. The revitalization of Fair Park and downtown Dallas, the development of the Trinity River and the signature Calatrava bridges, and the 2011 Super Bowl will provide a great opportunity to showcase Dallas to the rest of the world.

And, here's another thing we have going for us: a Travel Value Index created by Hotwire in 2006. Since that year, Dallas has jumped from ranking ninth as a "value-minded destination" to ranking second (for the second year in a row) as a spot where visitors "find the best value and entertainment options."

On the economic front, according to Hollingsworth, one of 11 jobs here is connected to the travel or leisure business—that's hotels, restaurants, and transportation. And, Estrada says, "The more people that come to our city, the more money they spend, and those sales tax dollars come into our city coffers. It's a domino effect. People don't just come and go and do one thing. They eat, they stay in a hotel, they go to a museum or a game. They come, they spend, they leave—it doesn't cost us a dime in city services."

So now it's time to do our part. Nothing should inspire us more than the spirit of competition spurred by recent advertisements here in the DFW market encouraging visitors to discover Houston. But those ads will come and go. We need to be our own best ambassadors, and encourage those we know to come and vacation here. We've never been perceived as being short on ego or confidence; now we need to have a little pride—and speak up. **D**



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