



MOON RIVER BREWING COMPANY

Happy Hostess

KRISTIN DETWILER HAS SHOWN SAVANNAH AND ITS GUESTS THAT HOSPITALITY IS HER SPECIALTY.

At The Coffee Fox on Broughton Street in downtown Savannah, Georgia, Kristin Detwiler, owner of Savannah Destination Management, sits at the back table with a notepad and pen. Her ear is pressed to her cell phone in an attempt to hear over the jazz blaring through the coffee house speakers. On the line is a very important client – the director for the 39th Bomb Group (VH) (Guam 1945). The prestigious group of men flew with the Air Force and was stationed on Guam during the 1940s. They meet at a new destination every year to remember the ones who never made it home and the teamwork they demonstrated in the combat missions they flew against Japan that earned them two Distinguished Unit Citations. This is the second time in two years Detwiler has helped the group plan a meeting. Last year it was in Savannah. This year it will be in Annapolis, but the group loved Detwiler’s last itinerary so much they asked her to plan the trip again.

However, an out-of-town itinerary is unusual for Detwiler. Typically, she plays “cruise director” to large groups of tourists staying in Savannah, planning their daily events, entertainment, tours and anything else above and beyond a hotel concierge service. She connects the groups seeking her know-how with vendors around Savannah, helping to make sure their events have everything they need – from linen tablecloths and centerpieces to transportation around the city – and that the visitors have something to do during the day. A petite blonde with a friendly smile and outgoing attitude, Detwiler has shown Savannah and its guests that hospitality is her specialty.

GAINING CONNECTIONS

Because she grew up in Savannah, Detwiler is connected with people all over the town of around 136,286 residents. Detwiler has not gained her connections merely by birthright. She also serves on several of the Chamber of Commerce boards, including the Tourism Leadership Board and Visit Savannah, helping to build her reputation as a leader in knowing what is new and popular for tourists.

These leadership positions also allow her to meet and get to know people usually inaccessible because of their busy day jobs. In these roles, she sits at the same tables with people like the general managers of the Hyatt and the director of sales at the Marriott. Detwiler volunteers at the TLC luncheons to gain more access to people who might be good connections for her business.

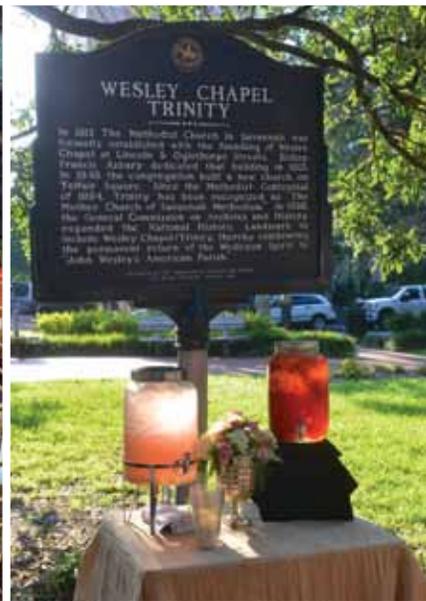
“A lot of times people attend luncheons and the tendency of people is to go to who you know and only talk to that person,” she says. “That’s not good for networking because those are the only people you have spoken to, and you haven’t made any new connections.”

Her tip for those wanting to make professional connections: Greet everyone.

“For instance, I got asked about babysitting services lately,” Detwiler says. “Guardian Angels is a member of the TLC and a childcare service. So, I recommended [Guardian Angels] to my client for that service because I’ve seen [the business owner] at the luncheons.”

BUILDING HER BUSINESS

Detwiler did not jump from high school to opening



Even though the process is the same for each new client, Detwiler's days are always different. Each client's request is different and individual budgets have to be taken into consideration. This does not bother Detwiler, however. Instead, she sees every client as a new challenge. And ultimately, her job is to make sure the clients have fun and see as much of her hometown as they can, in the hopes that they will come back as a tourist with their own families – and make a recommendation to their friends.



her own business. She first attended the University of South Carolina in Columbia where she earned her degree in hotel restaurant tourism administration. After finishing college, she moved to D.C. for four and a half years, traveling all over the United States with her job at Smith Bucklin, the world's leading association management company.

"We planned meetings for all of the different associations that were with us," she explains about her first "grown-up" job in the industry.

After time spent in big cities working long hours, Savannah called Detwiler home. Thirteen years ago, there were no meeting planning jobs in Savannah, so she applied to The Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort and Spa, which had been open for six months at the time.

After working at The Westin for four years, Detwiler took a position at another company that was similar to her business today, Savannah Destination Management. This allowed her to plant the seeds for Savannah Destination Management. When the economy took a turn for the worse in 2009, Detwiler's job was cut down to part time. She turned that into an opportunity to start her business, centering it in her home office in order to stay with her young daughter.

"I started when the economy was pretty down and I figured, hopefully, every year would be better than the first," she says. "And it has."

ALL ABOARD

As a manager of corporate and military groups that come to Savannah for meetings and entertainment, Detwiler uses her networking skills to the max, planning detailed itineraries for each group based on its specific needs. She's done so successfully for companies such as Carbonates; Agri-King; MotivAction, LLC; The Miller Group; and Canadian Construction Association – all of which thank her for her organization and team involvement before and during their excursions. For example, Detwiler added special décor and touches unique to Independent Pharmacy Cooperative, earning her a rewarding review that read, "Words cannot describe our appreciation. The members just raved about all of the venues and activities."

"Traditionally, this job is to do tours. So I incorporate tours," she says. "But then I stop in private homes for tours. Private homes are



Never a Dull Moment

Once they're here, Detwiler makes sure to use all of her contacts with the owners of these hot attractions to make sure they want to come back. She boils down the business of managing tourism to listening to her clients first, then, with the help of her friendly connections, creating unique itineraries for each group.





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The future of Savannah Destination Management depends on the success of Savannah's economy. With a foundation built on the port, manufacturing, tourism, military and service industries, Savannah's economy grows, allowing Detwiler to keep her business up and running as more corporations want to bring their employees to the best spots and those employees then bring their families back on vacation.

really neat because [tourists] have the opportunity to look in the window and talk to the homeowner.”

In her planning, Detwiler makes sure to include a “special treat,” such as a trip to Mrs. Wilkes’ Boarding House or afternoon tea at the Gryphon Tea Room.

“Those are just fun, different things that we can add to it,” she says.

Creating itineraries is not the only thing on her daily to-do list, though. Thanks to Broughton Street’s reawakening, tourism has recently doubled. In 2012, Savannah generated record-breaking numbers, bringing in 7 million visitors and pushing Savannah into a full-blown vacation destination. Increased shopping and attractions has allowed Detwiler to get new ideas for things to do with her clients. She takes inspiration from the scenery and local businesses found in Savannah. The Hostess City boasts many different hotels, including the new Andaz, resort and boutique properties, historic venues like the Railroad Round House, Fort Jackson and the Olde Pink House, and newer scenes such as the Jepson Center for the Arts and the Telfair Museum.

“I remember coming downtown, and really, downtown was just like River Street when I was little,” she recalls. “You didn’t really go to Broughton Street. So, for the industry, I think Savannah is still one of those places that’s on people’s bucket list. There is still so much to see every time they come back.”

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“When the client calls me, I have to ask discovery questions because, a lot of times, they’ll send you information, but they don’t realize that they haven’t given you the whole picture,” she says.

After each group’s itinerary is complete and the tourists have gone home, Detwiler sinks back in her brown leather chair in her home office for a few deep breaths. Her cluttered white desk is piled with papers from the last group’s meeting and flowers recently brought home by her husband, Jeremy. Across the hall from her home office, she hears her daughter practicing her piano and closes her eyes to listen. But not for long. The phone squawks and a new client needs something to do with 200 visitors coming to town in a few weeks. Detwiler tunes out the soft music floating around her home and concentrates on the voice coming from the phone.

Even though the process is the same for each new client, Detwiler’s days are always different. Each client’s request is different and individual budgets have to be taken into consideration. This does not bother Detwiler, however. Instead, she sees every client as a new challenge. And ultimately, her job is to make sure the clients have fun and see as much of her hometown as they can, in the hopes that they will come back as a tourist with their own families – and make a recommendation to their friends.

“We have a beautiful city that we get to show off every day” she explains, happy to be the person charged with this responsibility. “It’s all about the positive experiences [the clients] have here.”

✦ **CCL**