

Agritourism: Bring tourists to the countryside

By Seth Tupper

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CANOVA - Agritourism” is the buzzword of the moment in the visitor industry, but some South Dakotans are skeptical.

Just what, they wonder, would a tourist ever do on a farm?

The answer is nothing. They would do absolutely nothing, and they would love it.

“You don’t need clowns doing cartwheels through your cornfields,” said Jacquie Fuks, executive director of Southeast South Dakota Tourism. “You just need to let them come and sit on the porch.”

Delores Skoglund and her husband, Alden, do precisely that at their farm near Canova. They began a bed-and-breakfast at their home during the 1950s, before anybody ever heard of agritourism.

The Skoglunds offer home-cooked food, country lodging, and not much more. Many of their customers just want to escape cities like Chicago or New York.

“We get a lot of repeats,” said Mrs. Skoglund. “We got letters this Christmas from people who stayed with us 15 or 20 years ago.”

The Skoglunds have never developed a Web site, plowed a maze through their corn, or otherwise dressed up their operation. Like Fuks, they know many guests want nothing more than clean air, open spaces and isolation.

But some people crave excitement. For them,

there are agritourism companies that specialize in farm and ranch tours, bird watching, nature photography, hiking, snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing, crop picking, cattle drives, home-cooking classes, guided hunting and fishing, wildlife viewing and more.

Russell Stubbles, an agritourism consultant from Brookings, has traveled the world and never encountered a shortage of ideas.

“I don’t want to say it’s unlimited, but it’s close,” he said. “It’s almost limited only by your imagination.”

Most of the ideas require little or no investment, Stubbles said. Getting started in agritourism can be as simple as formulating an idea and developing a Web site.

“It’s not unusual to have a farmer or rancher sitting on the Internet for two hours before they go to work,” Stubbles said. “Now we have the capability to market agritourism, using that same computer, to Germany or Chicago or Omaha.”

Agritourism ventures can be as big or small as the operator desires. Many projects are part-time businesses that provide supplementary incomes, but some grow into small or large companies.

Stubbles’ goal for his consulting business, Agritourism for the Prairie, is to create 500 new South Dakota agritourism jobs in five years. He envisions a future where hundreds of rural South Dakota tourist destinations are

networked together on the Web, easily accessible to people all over the world.

For tourism officials like Fuks, the future is now. Her organization receives many agritourism inquiries and has responded with a tour guide titled "Off the Beaten Path." She also has arranged many workshops for Stubbles.

Fuks herself is a big-city native who married a South Dakota man. She remembers how thrilled she once was to walk through a cornfield and see some old wagon tracks, and she thinks others will "come in droves" to have similar experiences.

"People from the city want to do that," she said, "but they can't just drive in a driveway. We have to invite them."

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