

Ark Encounter Makes Enormous Impact in First Year

On July 7, the internationally renowned Ark Encounter theme park south of Cincinnati will celebrate its first anniversary, continuing to welcome thousands of guests each day to the massive 510-foot-long reproduction of Noah's Ark.

On the completion of its excellent first year of attendance, the impressive visitor traffic is only increasing as the summer continues. The huge growth of motor coach tours, a nationwide TV and billboard advertising campaign and word-of-mouth buzz being generated by visitors are prompting more and more people from around the world to travel and see the stunningly large Noah's Ark.

The life-size ark and its sister attraction, the Creation Museum (which just turned 10 years old) near the Cincinnati airport, have become major national and international tourist destinations. Almost every day, several nations are represented; in addition, last week, reporters from two European countries and one Asian nation toured the ark.

"What strikes me as I walk through the large parking lots of both attractions," observes Ken Ham, the visionary behind the theme parks, "is that about 95 per cent of the vehicles have out-of-state license plates. On a given summer day, more than 10,000 guests, traveling here in thousands of vehicles, will visit one of our attractions. The words I hear the most from guests in describing their encounter with the ark are 'amazing,' 'awesome,' 'way beyond our expectations,' and 'spectacular.' It's become a huge tourist hit."

The attractions are owned and operated by the nonprofit ministry Answers in Genesis (AiG). AiG reports that after its opening on July 7, 2016, the ark, in its first 10 weeks, welcomed 325,000 visitors. That figure is significant because a study commissioned by the state predicted that if the Ark Encounter were a creationist attraction (and it is), it would

draw only 325,000 visitors the first year.

For its part, AiG instead used America's Research Group (ARG) to conduct nationwide market research on the Ark Encounter and predicted attendance to be 1.4 – 2.2 million for a normal year of operation. Even though the ark did not open until the middle of the tourist season in July of 2016, its first, non-normal year has still seen 1 million visitors (with over 1.5 million visitors total for both attractions). AiG predicts that the second year's attendance will be closer to the high end of the ARG figure, based on several factors: hundreds of motor coaches are booked to come (organized by numerous tour companies), other group bookings are also increasing, people now having ample time to plan their vacations to the ark and other encouraging trends.

One motor coach company alone is bringing over 400 bus loads this year, and is predicting even larger numbers for next spring and summer. The ark has had days with 40 buses in its parking lot, with another 30 at the Creation Museum—nearly all of them from outside AiG's tri-state area of Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana. The Creation Museum has seen daily average attendance more than double on most days compared to 2016, and on many days, it has tripled.

While the region has many excellent attractions, the ark and museum are unlike most of them in that they draw about 95 per cent of their visitors from outside the tri-state. New money is pouring into the regional economy as out-of-town guests stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, purchase items (gasoline, souvenirs and so forth) and pay admission to visit other attractions.

The tremendous economic impact in the region led the Northern Kentucky Convention and Visitors Bureau to award AiG the Star of Tourism Award this year. Using a bureau equation, the Creation Museum alone has added a minimum of \$500 million to the local economy since 2007. The Ark Encounter draws about three times as many visitors as the museum. The Ark's first-year economic impact is around \$200 million.

Over the next decade, with 2-3 million people each year likely visiting both the Ark and museum (and attendance should climb as major phases are added), the total economic impact should be in the billions of dollars. In Grant County, where the ark is located, its residents will be enjoying tax relief, and over the years, the state should be receiving millions of dollars of additional sales taxes collected from local businesses that cater to ark tourists.

AiG co-founder Mark Looy noted: "The economic impact of the attractions has demonstrated the state's wisdom in offering incentives for qualifying tourist attractions to build in the commonwealth. Directly and indirectly, Kentucky, because of the ark and the museum, has already benefited from thousands of new jobs and has seen more money available for state programs, which reduces the tax burden of its residents."

"The only downside is that countless people tell us they can't find hotel rooms on certain dates and give up coming to the area," added Looy. "Thankfully, some relief is coming, as many hotel developers are already looking to build in Grant County. So eventually, more money will be pouring into the regional economy as out-of-town guests have access to more hotels."

On Friday, the ark's anniversary, credentialed media are invited to tour the ark and see what has been added since July 2016. AiG spokespersons like Dr. Georgia Purdom (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) and AiG co-founders Mike Zovath and Mark Looy will be available for interviews on Friday morning. In addition, interviews can be arranged with government officials in Grant County, who will attest to the phenomenal economic impact of the Ark in their county.

Located south of Cincinnati at exit 154 off I-75, the Ark Encounter is within a day's drive of almost 2/3 of America's population. In addition to the full-scale Noah's Ark with three decks of world-class exhibits in over 120,000 square feet, the campus of the Ark Encounter theme park includes the Ararat Ridge Zoo (with petting zoo), zip lines, live entertainment, a 1,500-seat themed restaurant and fair-trade shopping. The hours of operation and tickets are available

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