

Austin pair planning to offer barbecue, country music to international fans of F1

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Published: 7:58 p.m. Friday, May 4, 2012

Circuit of the Americas may be aptly named. Early indications are there's as much interest from South America as there is from North America for Austin's first Formula One race in November.

That, at least, is what Formula Austin President Andy Fish is seeing.

"We've had almost as much response from Argentina as we've had here in the U.S.," Fish said. "Mexico and Argentina are coming in huge."

Fish is managing partner of Texas Legislative Services. He's also a car collector and Formula One fan who has been going to races since 1976. About a year ago he and his cousin, Anne Fish, became serious about packaging distinctive Austin and Texas experiences for out-of-town F1 visitors during the race week.

Their selection includes everything from a concert with Willie Nelson and Ray Benson to a rare night-time stop at Franklin Barbecue and a shopping spree at Neiman Marcus.

"We're going to show people what they can't get at the other 19 (F1) venues around the world," Fish said. "It's a way of letting people who live in freakin' Monaco see what culture is like in Texas."

Fish said his company is targeting 2.3 million F1 fans through a Facebook rollout that started this month. The campaign has reached 115,000 fans in 24 countries, he said. While Monaco isn't exactly freaking out about Austin's race, several unanticipated countries are. After the top three — the U.S., Argentina and Mexico — Venezuela, Brazil and Canada have been showing the most interest, ahead of the first European country on the list, the United Kingdom, Fish said.

Argentina hosted Formula One races sporadically from 1953 to 1998 and hopes to attract a street race as early as next year.

Brazil will host the final F1 race of the year the week after Austin's Nov. 18 Grand Prix and is known for its passionate F1 fans. Brazilians are also acquiring a reputation as sought-after international travelers.

"They spend. They come to shop," said Eric Hamblen, managing director of Global Hospitality Marketing Link, a Florida-based company that promotes Austin internationally.

In appealing to international travelers the Fishes hope to trade on Texas stereotypes rather than break them.

Benson concurs. "We want them to know there are cowboy hats and twangy guitars here."

The concert planned for Nov. 15 at Austin City Limits Live at the Moody Theater will feature Nelson, Benson and Asleep at the Wheel, Pat Green, Jerry Jeff Walker and more.

Ticket prices — \$190 for balcony and \$275 for floor and mezzanine — are steep by Austin standards, but that's by design.

"This is a great Texas show without having seven band changes," said Benson, whose band will serve as backup for other acts in the revue. "We want to show the world what Texas music is all about."

Fish said he has 23 Texas-style events lined up and is planning to add some more. One of the most intriguing experiences, which is drawing interest from Argentines, is dubbed "So You Want to be a Cowboy," an afternoon with Karen and Steve Robinson to learn some riding and roping, as well as do some eating, for \$675.

Even more high-dollar could be a splurge at Neiman Marcus. The store will be closed Friday evening to all but 20 shoppers who'll be able to sip champagne while going on a personal shopping spree.

Formula Austin's Great Barbecue Wars will have Franklin Barbecue open at night and also include the Iron Works and Stiles Switch BBQ.

Another distinctly Texas-style eating experience will be a cooking class at chef Jeff Blank's house and then a meal at Hudson's on the Bend, known for preparing wild game and its Diamond Back Rattlesnake Cake.

"Where can you eat pistachio-crusting rattlesnake snacks in Europe?" Fish asked.

"It's a no-brainer for us," said Hudson's general manager Sara Courington. "They're putting everything together. ... We're just doing what we do best."

Courington added, "We'll see who shows up from around the world. ... I think it will create lots of worldwide interest in Austin."

Fish said that despite its projected economic impact, Formula One has not been an easy sell.

"It's been a tough road in this town to get this gift recognized. It's a huge economic engine that was handed to us," Fish said. "Two-thirds of the people we met with had no idea what we were talking about."

Circuit of the Americas is not involved with Formula Austin, but circuit investor Bobby Epstein said: "I'm glad to hear that people are joining the festivity. We'll soon have an incredible schedule of events to announce. It should be a very fun week."

Fish said Austin has the potential to match any Formula One venue except Monaco and its storied race.

"In 2012, we don't have to worry about who's coming to Austin, we're the new kid on the block," Fish said. "We want them to come back in 2013 and 2014. ... I really believe if we show them a good time it will be the No. 2 venue in the world."

Of the impact of Austin's F1 race Hamblen said: "Nobody really knows what is going to happen. It's going to be big, but that's all we know."

<http://www.statesman.com/sports/formula1/austin-pair-planning-to-offer-barbecue-country-music-2340751.html>