

What recession? Island attracting bevy of spring break tourists

By GRACE GAGLIANO - gagostin@bradenton.com

ANNA MARIA ISLAND — A full-blown recession doesn't appear to be keeping beachgoers from heading to Anna Maria Island to celebrate another spring break.

Business owners along the Gulf Coast say they're getting early indications that this year's spring tourism season will be healthy despite economic conditions that have raised the United States' unemployment rate to 8.1 percent and Manatee County's to 10.1 percent, the highest in 25 years.

"The car traffic on the roads has been pretty astounding," said Eric Connors, co-owner of Mr. Bones BBQ. "It looks like it's going to be a pretty good spring."

That's good news considering March typically has the highest hotel occupancy rates and brings in the most tourist dollars of any other month for Manatee County.

Since 2006, Manatee occupancy rates for March have hit 83 percent or higher. Last March, Manatee reached a record high in occupancy — 88.9 percent — and tourism taxes collected — \$852,120.

While those numbers might be tough to match in this economy, tourism officials say a recent wave of national media coverage of Anna Maria Island is giving businesses a boost. Southern Living's March issue featured Anna Maria Island with a four-page article, and USA Today published a travel feature on the island in December.

"It's just unleashed a surge of interest," said David Teitelbaum, a Tourism Development Council member and owner of Tortuga Inn, Tradewinds Resort and SeaSide Inn Beach Resort. "Anna Maria Island is not a secret anymore."

The Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce saw 42,634 unique visits to the chamber's Web site in January and 39,340 in February. And the chamber mailed out 863 tourism guidebooks in February.

Chamber and business officials believe these numbers are a good indication of a strong spring tourism season.

"This is huge for us," said Mary Ann Brockman, president of the AMI chamber.

Island Real Estate of Anna Maria Island says it's expecting a record number of reservations this weekend. The firm says more than 70 families will check in for vacation properties that include beachfront cottages and duplexes.

"It's a record number of check-ins for us," said Frank Davis, broker for Island Real Estate. "And it represents just about 1 percent of the residential inventory on the island."

In anticipation of another busy spring, some island restaurants added to their staffs. The Sandbar Restaurant, Skipper's Bar & Grill, Mr. Bones BBQ and the BridgeTender Inn hired seasonal employees as cooks, bartenders and servers.

"We're very happy with this year already," said Sue Shinka, owner of Bridge Tender Inn in Bradenton Beach.

But year-end tourism numbers for Florida were alarming. Florida's annual visitor numbers declined in 2008 for the first time in seven years, according to Visit Florida, the state's tourism authority. Florida saw 82.5 million visitors, down 2.3 percent from 2007.

Lillian Spencer, spokeswoman for Visit Florida, said the tourism authority launched an advertising campaign the first of this year aimed at increasing tourism among Florida's drive-market. The multimedia ads will run through the summer and will highlight tourism destinations within commuting distance for Floridians.

"We know that 60 percent of Floridians take vacations out of state, and we want to convert those vacationers into in-state visitors," Spencer said.

Visit Florida will market family-oriented destinations and blog about activities such as eco-tourism trips, bicycle tours, and arts and culture. This could further benefit Anna Maria Island as its spring break crowd already attracts more families and subdued college students than partygoers looking for an MTV spring break camera crew.

"We don't have the big parties like Panama City," said Mark Davis, co-owner of the Harrington House Bed & Breakfast in Holmes Beach. "We have more of the couples, the engagements."

Barbara Rodocker, owner of Bridgewalk and Sun House Restaurant in Bradenton Beach, said the rash of bad winter storms that swung through the North helped the island's case, as well.

"We've been very fortunate that we've had a good winter this spring and they've had bad weather," Rodocker said. "We find that the people who are coming are very appreciative of being here this year."



GRANT JEFFERIES/giefferies@bradenton.com Visiting the area from Ontario, Canada, Marguerite and Ken Randall, with Tracy Patterson-Young, right, and her two children Taylor Patterson, 10, and William Patterson, 7, enjoyed the day at the Manatee Public Beach on Friday.