

MONDAY BUSINESS

Bradenton Herald, Monday, Jan. 09, 2012

VISITORS WELCOME



Photos by PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com David Teitelbaum, president of Anna Maria Island Resorts, which operates four hotels on the island, shows off his Tortuga Inn's new carry-out and delivery restaurant, Le Petit Café, which will be managed by the Island Creperie and will service all four hotels. Large LCD televisions flanking the kitchen entrance will display menu items with pictures and will fit in with the hotel's new high-tech fitments. Le Petit Café will hold a ribbon cutting and host a Manatee County Chamber of Commerce after-hours networking event Jan. 19.

Upswing in tourism seen as local economy's savior

By JOSH SALMAN -

MANATEE -- Hospitality businesses throughout the Suncoast believe a strong peak tourism season will turn the tide on the recession.

And with so much riding on this season, a few slow months could prove devastating. But tourism-driven businesses in Manatee and Sarasota say 2011 closed on a solid note, and they're predicting even better numbers for 2012.

As indicated by roadway traffic, flocks of winter residents already are making their presence known at restaurants, shops and night clubs. International visitors also have mostly shed the negative misconceptions left from the Gulf oil disaster -- further bolstering occupancy for local resorts.



An artist's rendering of the pergola that will be installed at the Tortuga Inn Beach Resort in Bradenton Beach and used for weddings, private parties and events.

Some stakeholders are even calling for the best tourism season since the recession.

“In the past, we were just praying for even,” said Erin Duggan, spokeswoman for the Sarasota Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. “This is the first spring in a while most are optimistic for an increase.”



PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com A mini-market is stocked with wine and other drinks and sundries inside the recently remodeled Tortuga Inn's ground floor office.

Southwest Florida's winter tourism season generally begins around Thanksgiving, peaking from Presidents Day to Easter. During that time, area resorts typically boast their highest occupancy numbers of the year, despite temporary rate hikes.

The Anna Maria Island-Longboat Key area has drawn some 422,600 visitors year-to-date through October, the latest numbers available. That tally represents a 5.8 percent increase over the same time in 2010 -- pumping \$457.6 million into the local economy, according to Research Data Services Inc.

Tourism officials expect those figures to climb through spring, fanned by general economic improvements and erased fears of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill -- which still muddled the minds of some at this time last year.

"The islands are pretty full through March, and that's a really good sign," said Debbie Meihls, executive manager for the Bradenton Area Convention and

Visitor's Bureau. "We haven't always seen the bookings go out that far."

The agency has placed an emphasis on marketing beyond just the beaches to include the area's sports attractions -- including rowing facilities and Bradenton's IMG Academy. The ongoing revitalization efforts downtown also has helped, Meihls said.

Manatee's latest reported hotel occupancy rates are around 56 percent, while the Sarasota market is just over 48 percent. In February and March, those totals historically surge to the upper 70s and 80s, statistics show.

"We had a better fall season than we anticipated, but you're not satisfied until you have people waiting at the door," said Barbara Rodocker, owner of the BridgeWalk Resort and the Silver Surf Resort in Bradenton Beach. "I have been doing this for 30 years, and I think we're going to have a very good tourism season."

Smaller beach condos rely on peak season more than corporate chains, which also corral revenue from business travelers.

Many area resorts also are benefiting from "staycations," a term coined during the recession from Floridians

who spent their time off close to home. Leisure travelers are still scaling back, said David Teitelbaum, president of Anna Maria Island Resorts, which operates four hotels on the island.

"Fewer people are taking these extravagant trips to Europe and South America," he said. "They're not so quick to jump on planes, and that bodes well for us."

At his resorts, Teitelbaum is preparing for the uptick by investing in expanded Internet technology and a new cafe that will offer food delivery service.

Area restaurateurs also are seeing business on the upswing, with similar predictions of better days ahead.



PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com Pool mosaics stretch across the main lobby of the Tortuga Inn's remodeled entrance and office space.



PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com A view of the pool area at the Tropic Isles Inn, which is currently undergoing renovation. It's one of four properties operated by Anna Maria Island Resorts.

“We had a couple of tough years like everyone, but things are picking up more and more,” said Chef Paul Mattison, owner of three Mattison’s restaurants in the Sarasota area. “We feel like the economy has turned in many ways.”

Mattison said the biggest increases have come with his catering business, which already has a slew of booking for weddings and other events several months in advance.

Those that haven’t changed their formula through hard times are now better positioned to rebound, he said.

Even businesses that weren’t around last year are preparing for a busy season. Many are revamping their advertising strategies to catch the eye of visitors instead of locals -- the focus through summer and fall.

“Things have been pretty quiet so far,” said Rich Kaiser, owner of the Rhythm Night Club in downtown Sarasota, which opened in October. “But we’re doing more to attract tourists, and we really think the venue will take off.”

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Read more here: <http://www.bradenton.com/2012/01/09/3774100/upswing-in-tourism-seen-as-local.html#storylink=cpy>



PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com Mark Bennett, an electrician with Bundy Electric, installs wiring inside the walls of an efficiency apartment at the Tropic Isles Inn, which is currently undergoing renovation. It's one of four properties operated by Anna Maria Island Resorts.