

Tourism Looks to Rebound After Hurricane Ian

By Sean Doherty

As we all know, tourism plays a very important economic role, not only for Charlotte County, but for the entire State of Florida. The revenues generated from visitor spending are the primary reason that Florida does not implement a state income tax, saving each household thousands of dollars annually. In addition, according to a third-party visitor tracking study, fiscal year 2021 taxes related to visitor spending in Charlotte County provided our residents an average relief of \$875 per household. These revenues were generated from the 863,000 visitors who spent more than \$844 million in our destination, which also helps support more than 10,700 jobs for local residents. Results from fiscal year 2022 visitation are still being compiled and is expected to significantly exceed last year's outcomes.

Fiscal year 2023, which kicked off on Oct. 1, began with much concern and uncertainty due to the impacts that Hurricane Ian delivered to the entire Southwest Florida region. While we understand and are sensitive to the destruction caused by the storm, we are optimistic about the prospects of tourism recovering in the relatively short term. Although damage assessments show that close to 50% of our hotel room inventory is temporarily unavailable, we are confident most of these rooms will be back online to welcome our peak season visitors. Also, the majority of our restaurants have already re-opened as have most attractions and activity operators, such as kayak outfitters, fishing charters and ecotour providers. Just as important, our natural attractions weathered Ian relatively well with minimal beach erosion, reopened waterways, and more county parks reopening every day as debris removal and safety assessments are completed.

Another very positive sign of this progress is reflected in the fact that Englewood Beach Waterfest is taking place as scheduled next weekend, which we're very grateful for as it not only provides a sense of normalcy for our residents but also generates a significant economic impact for the community.

This, of course, is not the first time our local tourism industry has faced adversity. In my 17 years with the Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau, I've experienced the resiliency of the industry to the aftermath of Hurricane Charley, the negative perception induced by the BP oil spill, the effects of the significant red tide event that spanned the entire calendar year of 2018 and obviously the travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. One thing all of these adverse events have in common is we came out better on the other end. Punta Gorda experienced a renaissance after Charley with the addition of new hotels, shops and restaurants, not to mention the Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center, which has hosted a plethora of local functions as well as events that have attracted visitors from all over the country.

The oil spill and red tide event put a larger spotlight on the importance of water quality motivating both the public and private sector to invest in research and development. This will continue to lead to improved technologies and infrastructure ensuring healthy beaches, estuaries and blueway trails, all of which are vitally important tourism assets.

Finally, COVID provided exposure of our destination to visitors who sought us out in order to avoid high-traffic metro areas. Research has shown that 89% of those first-time visitors plan to return to our destination in the future. We are fortunate to live and work in such a beautiful destination where our biggest draws for both visitors and residents are our natural attractions. These assets will lead the charge for our recovery from this latest challenge. If you'd like to help in this recovery, don't forget to encourage your family and friends to come for a visit. Together, we are Southwest Florida strong!

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