



County recognized by travel sites ahead of holiday weekend

By Stuart Korfhage
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On what is expected to be a busy Memorial Day Weekend, St. Johns County is likely to be a popular destination, in part because of appearances in various media reports.

In recent weeks, the St. Augustine area has been listed as a top destination by media sources like NBC News, USA Today, MSNBC and TravelPulse, among others.

Earlier in the week, NBC named St. Augustine No. 1 on its list of 10 most affordable vacations in the country. It beat out nearby hot spot Daytona Beach and other popular destinations like Williamsburg, Virginia.

The rankings came from a GoBankingRates report, based on the average costs involved in staying there. The prices were considered for a family of four and don't include travel to or from the city or tickets to certain local attractions. St. Augustine's total was \$1,636 for a week.

The piece mentioned attractions like the St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum and the Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park as well as the 42 miles of beaches.

Barbara Golden, the communications manager for the county visitors and conventions bureau (VCB), said the county keeps ending up on these lists because the destination cultivates repeat visitors and offers a great balance of tourist-focused and community-based appeal.

"I hear that from people all the time," Golden said. "Whenever I'm working with someone (in the media), they say, 'It has such a magical feel but it is for real.'"

"It is a living, working community. One thing that they all note about is that everyone is so friendly and genuine. I think that is one of the major things that keeps us on those lists."

In addition to the lists, Golden added that the county benefited from a lot of exposure from The Players Championship, which moved back to March this year after being played in May in recent years.

Golden said the VCB doesn't spend a lot of effort trying to attract tourists when the area is already busy like on holiday weekends. But it does push hard for mid-week visitors and for the shoulder seasons like early May and September.

According to information released by AAA, marketing for the holiday weekend isn't much needed. The travel organization reported that a strong economy and weaker gas prices should help boost travel numbers this weekend. It forecasts the strongest kick-off to the summer travel season since 2005 and the second-largest travel volume on record — dating back to 2000.

Just in Florida, AAA estimates there will be 2.3 million travelers, 86,000 (3.9 percent) more than last year. It also predicts a total of 42.8 million Americans will travel this year, which is 1.5 million (3.6 percent) more than last year.

"Floridians are eagerly anticipating the start of summer, and gas prices should not be a deterrent," said AAA spokesman Mark Jenkins in a release. "Consumer spending remains strong, helped by solid job and income growth. Families continue to allocate their disposable incomes on travel, and a near-record number of them will do just that for Memorial Day."

In 2018, the most expensive gas prices of the year were in the days leading up to Memorial Day weekend. The biggest difference between now and then is the price of oil, which is about \$10 per barrel less than a year ago

Similar to the downturn in gas prices, hotel and car rental prices are lower this year, while airfares hold steady, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index.

Orlando, New York City and Las Vegas are expected to be the top destinations in the U.S. this weekend, based on advance AAA Travel bookings. With Orlando being a popular destination, there is usually a spillover of visitors into St. Johns County.