



Tourism numbers hit new high in 2017

By Stuart Korfhage
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Rising tourism numbers throughout the state provided a boost to St. Johns County last year despite the effects of a hurricane for the second straight year.

Hurricane Irma most likely kept Florida from reaching a goal of 120 million visitors last year, but it didn't stop the state from hitting a new single-year tourism high, according to numbers released Tuesday by Gov. Rick Scott.

Florida drew an estimated 116.5 million visitors in 2017, up 3.6 percent from the previous high of 112.4 million in 2016.

With St. Augustine, the beaches and Ponte Vedra Beach gaining in popularity, it could be assumed that this area will draw its share of tourists regardless of statewide trends.

But Richard Goldman, president and CEO of the county visitors and convention bureau, said that would be a mistake. He said St. Johns County draws lots of visitors who have other primary destinations.

In other words, crowds at Disney World, Universal Studios and other attractions also affect St. Johns County.

"We also depend on Orlando being successful because a big part of our strategy is harvesting visitors and getting sampling from folks who are coming to Orlando, the theme parks and such, and wanting to check out our destination," Goldman said. "By creating that sampling, we know we've grown the business. We definitely look to that general visitation to Florida as an opportunity."

Goldman's office does not track the number of actual visitor numbers to the county but does track overnight stays. He said occupancy, demand and average daily rate were all up in 2017 for St. Johns County.

"We focus a lot on that overnight visitor," Goldman said. "They tend to spend a little more money. They take advantage of more of the assets we have.

"The overnights are really our bread and butter. They create a greater economic impact. We're real pleased with what we have seen so far."

With the first quarter of 2018 to be finished, Goldman said January and February were strong months for the lodging industry. And March, which is usually second only to July in total guests, seems to be successful so far as well.

Statewide, the tourist head count is important as sales-tax revenue helps fuel state government and as tourism helps drive the economy, accounting for approximately 1.4 million jobs among Florida's workforce of 10.15 million.

Goldman said a study done for the county estimated direct visitor spending at \$1.1 billion for the year.

Even with the record tourism count, Visit Florida, which undertook a \$5 million post-Hurricane Irma effort, estimated that Irma cost the state \$1.5 billion in visitor spending.

A report for Visit Florida by Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company, found that Irma cost the state 1.8 million visitors, based on tourism trends before the September storm swept through the state. Irma made landfall in the Florida Keys and Collier County before barreling north.

"The majority of these lost visits occurred during September," the report stated. "By December, the number of actual out-of-state visitors was nearly equal to the number of expected visitors to the state."

Overall, the state recorded 102.3 million domestic travelers last year, up from 97.9 million in 2016 and 91.3 million 2015. Meanwhile, overseas travel dropped for the second consecutive year, from 11.4 million in 2015 to 11.1 million in 2016 and 10.7 million last year.

Canadian tourists, who have been a target of Visit Florida President and CEO Ken Lawson, grew from 3.3 million in 2016 to 3.5 million last year. Tourism numbers from Canada had been falling since a high of 4.2 million in 2013, due in part to the weakened Canadian dollar against its U.S. counterpart.

The state also recorded traffic at Florida's top 18 airports grew by 4.1 percent in 2017 from 2016, with 87.2 million passengers.

News Service of Florida contributed to this report.