



TDC report: Visitors spending more time, money in St. Augustine

By Colleen Jones
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It wasn't so long ago that St. Augustine was seen as a kind of side trip, an extra day or two added onto a visit to Orlando, Tampa or some other part of Florida.

But that has changed over the last decade, and even more so in the past few years.

Figures released last week by the St. Johns County Tourist Development Council (TDC) show that 86% of visitors surveyed said St. Johns County was their primary destination.

The report, which measured tourism between July and September 2019, is the second visitor profile study conducted by outside consultants Downs & St. Germain Research (the first measured the period between April and June 2019).

The county has contracted with the company in order to get more granular analytics of visitor trends. They provide data from a much larger sample size and go into much more detail than the limited studies the county previously used to guide marketing efforts.

Some of the most interesting takeaways from the summer 2019 report indicate that awareness of the appeal of St. Augustine/Ponte Vedra Beach has increased and the area is attracting more visitors both domestically and abroad as a standalone destination.

"It's not surprising, we've come a long way in these last 10 years," said Richard Goldman, president and CEO of the St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors and Convention Bureau.

The county is increasingly seeing more visitors from outside the U.S., particularly Europe. International visitors accounted for 13% of the overall number of tourists,

Irving Kass, owner of the St. George Inn, estimated that about 25% of his lodgers at any time are from another country.

“So the market has definitely expanded in St. Augustine being a real worldwide destination,” Kass said.

Goldman said this is important because, “The international visitor typically stays for a longer period of time and they spend more.”

The TDC report found that the typical vacationer had a median household income of \$99,400.

At 23%, a special event was cited as the top reason visitors traveled to St. Johns County.

“Nights of Lights, Sing Out Loud, the (St. Augustine) Amphitheatre, our restaurant scene — it all adds up,” said Kass.

Goldman added, “It certainly speaks well for our cultural arts offerings.”

The appeal of the area for wedding couples cannot be overlooked, either. Kass said his inn sees a lot of blocks of rooms bridal parties rent out for the occasion.

“We’re also seeing more corporate retreat type things, too,” Kass added.

Figures show hotels and motels continue to be the most popular type of lodging in St. Johns County (35%), followed by a vacation rental or Airbnb (14%), a stay with friends or relatives (13%) and other options. Twenty-three percent did not stay overnight.

A sampling of comments on what visitors liked most about St. Augustine included: “The history and lots of year-round outdoor activity,” “Outdoor concerts in the lovely venue of The Amp,” and “Prettiest beach in Florida.”

The more detailed visitor profile numbers also provide insight into areas where improvements could be made. For example, one in three visitors said more public parking would make St. Johns County a better place to visit.

Goldman said his office continues to talk with city and county officials about ways to create more spaces. He said the city reported a 64% increase in use of the park-and-ride shuttle program for Nights of Lights this year.

“I think that tells us that we’re doing a better job of managing people so we can be a sustainably growing tourist destination,” Goldman said.