

March 10, 2011 - By GRACE GAGLIANO

Tourism increases in Manatee County

Local tourism headed up after oil spill, northern storms

ANNA MARIA ISLAND -- Christy Krauss took a look at the spring reservations at her family-owned Holmes Beach resort this week.

The reservation schedule through April at Island Garden Villas shows exactly what Krauss wanted to see.

"We're pretty solidly booked," she said.

With memories of the BP oil spill fading, and after a series of winter blasts that pounded the Northeast, several island hoteliers say they're seeing a pent-up demand for beaches and palm trees.

And some hotels on Anna Maria Island are expecting spring occupancy levels to be at 90 percent or better.

"It was a very cold winter, and many people who normally come during winter time were unable to get out of airports, so they pushed their vacations forward," said David Teitelbaum, rental manager of Tortuga Inn, Tradewinds and Seaside Inn on Anna Maria Island.

Teitelbaum estimates his hotels' rooms, which can accommodate 450 people, are at least 90 percent booked for the spring.

"We're seeing a lot of Europeans and Canadians and people from the North who have been really snowed in the last two winters and want to get away from it all," he added.

A strong spring season couldn't come at a better time for Manatee County.

For the first time in two years, hotel tax collections in December and January declined when compared to their respective months a year ago.

December generated \$428,092 in tourism taxes, down from \$447,882 in December 2009, and January brought in \$704,378, down from \$706,357 in January 2010.

Aside from flight cancellations, hoteliers in Manatee County had a much larger crisis to manage.

The April 25, 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the widespread media coverage that followed, hoteliers say, caused uncertainty among would-be tourists about whether it was safe to travel to any beaches along the Gulf of Mexico.

"We're still getting questions from people up North asking if there's still oil out there," said Ken Gerry, co-owner of the White Sands Beach Resort in Holmes Beach. "It's been frustrating. But I'm not going to complain about the questions, we're just glad we have a chance to correct them."

Local hoteliers are glad to put the oil spill behind them.

"We're seeing numbers that we haven't seen for a few years," said Angela Rodocker, general manager of Bridgewalk and Silver Surf resorts in Bradenton Beach. "We're trending to be about 10 percent higher this spring than last year. The repercussions of the spill added to the existing issue we already had -- which was the economy."

Florida tourism -- the state's leading business industry -- saw two straight years of visitor declines until 2010.

Visit Florida, the state's tourism arm, reported a 2.1 percent increase in tourism for 2010 -- the first year-to-year increase in two years. An estimated 82.6 million tourists visited the Sunshine State in Florida last year.

"Overall, we're hoping to build upon the 2.1 percent increase we saw in 2010," said Chris Thompson, president and chief executive officer of Visit Florida. "We're optimistic that things will continue to improve as the economy is hopefully heading in a positive direction. We have the (oil spill) anniversary coming up and we're cautiously optimistic we've moved beyond that, too."

Visit Florida is also expecting its most recent advertising campaign, launched in six major cities, will garner more reservations for hotels this spring.

The television campaign titled Your Florida Side is being broadcast in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and Washington, D.C.

"Thirty percent of all our visitors come from those areas," Thompson said. "The ads really focus on that unique emotional connection that every one of our 81 million visitors has to Florida, whether it's family, romance, adventure, outdoors. A lot of major markets play into a lot of what we have to offer."

"Our brand is framed by our weather, our beaches, our warmth," he added. "Those are all the things people are dreaming about when they're digging their way out of the snow on their driveways in the morning."