

TOURISM

From page 1

Downtown Fort Myers

In the River District, the benefits of a project to beautify and replace utilities in 50 city blocks and restore the area's historic charms, may draw new visitors and get old ones back.

"We hope it's gonna be a good season," said Don Paight, director of the downtown Fort Myers redevelopment agency. "We're finishing up our streetscape, which makes it easier to access downtown."

The Morgan House owner Corry Blanton is looking forward to the pretty, new brick street and sidewalk that is being laid in front of his restaurant, a downtown favorite. Blanton took over from owners Joe and Leslie Ball a few years ago.

He continued to serve Morgan House favorites like Chicken Cordon Blue and burgers. He spruced up the bar, bathrooms and dining room extensively, and added some trendy twists and specials to the menu. He plans to place more tables outside as soon as he has a real sidewalk leading to his front door again.

"That's the major thing," he said, adding a short rib: "I'm complaining every day until it's done."

Across the street from Morgan House, Jennifer Daniels opened a business a few months ago called U4ia, a sexy boutique shop for couples.

"I'm expecting it to be busy," she said. "Friday night there was an art show and there were tons of people. I think the more (the streets) are open, and the more people can come through, the more good things I'm expecting."

Lisa Sbuttoni, marketing manager at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates near downtown, predicts a strong tourist season.

"We try to speak with every hotelier in Lee County and tell them about the Estates," she said. "That we're open, to come here if their checkout is early."

Or they could spend an evening at the theater if their flight is delayed.

Prather Entertainment Group's Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre in Fort Myers plans to bounce back from sparse summer crowds with a blockbuster season.

"Our advance bookings currently exceed where we stood at this time last year, which is an encouraging sign," owner Will Prather said. "We particularly expect to do very well with Irving Berlin's 'White Christmas,' followed by 'Singin' in the Rain.'

"We also expect to be operating at full capacity by the end of October and through most of April due to late Easter this year."

The Beaches

"We're definitely hoping for a big season," said Ken Conidaris, general manager at the Lani Kai Island Resort on Fort Myers Beach. "We're actually hoping it's a little better if gas prices sink down a little more. During season, we're usually pretty well filled up. Right now, people are just getting back to school, so it's a little early to tell."

Barb Garfold, owner of Lahaina Island Accommodations on Fort Myers Beach, said, "They come mostly from the Midwest and typically our largest draw is from Minnesota and Indiana.



FLORIDA WEEKLY FILE PHOTO

Snowbirds, tourists and residents love Lovers Key, just south of Fort Myers Beach.

"Because of the value of the Canadian dollar, we've gotten a lot of them as well."

She and her husband Paul purchased the 40-year-old company in 2005 and have grown through a revamped Internet site (beachfloridarentals.com), a new phone system and a new Reservation and Welcome Center on Estero Boulevard.

They manage 155 individually owned homes and condos on Estero Island, for seasonal vacation rentals. During the season, tourists rent for as little as one week or up to three months or more. Occupancy is up 3 percent this year, and their properties will be about 80 percent full throughout the year's busiest times, making room for those who might come in for last-minute trips.

"You get the ones who like to come in January, in February, and then you get the ones who like to come for the holidays," she said.

To prepare for season, the Garfolds hired a housing inspector who was previously employed at a luxury hotel in Maine.

"So she understands perfection," Barb Garfold said. "We are as perfect as we can physically be. When someone gets in, it's a clean unit, everything's in place. We just hope we have good weather."

"We make sure dishes aren't chipped, and pots and pans aren't rusty. We're preparing to make sure our properties are in good shape for repeat renters."

On Sanibel and Captiva islands, businesses are preparing for season to run late.

"Last year was the earliest Easter in years," said Robert Wells, owner of Cabbage Key Restaurant north of Captiva, where many customers arrive by boat. "The later off Easter is, the better off the Southwest Florida economy is from a tourism perspective."

"The big one on everybody's mind is where gas prices come in. The dramatic fall in the per-barrel price that we've been watching in the last couple of weeks, that does well for us if the airlines can operate without having to charge all that extra money."

Verdell Ekberg, a sales and marketing director for Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa, said group and convention business may be down this year, as well as tourists from up North.

"Much of this is due to heavier drive

markets (travelers who arrive by car)," she said. "And less business out of the Northeast and Midwest due to airfare increases, and fewer flights."

The resort is offering incentives for travelers this year, like advanced booking discounts and staying the fourth night for free.

Cynthia Welch, innkeeper at The Bokeelia Tarpon Inn, a luxury bed and breakfast at the northern tip of Pine Island, is optimistic.

"I think we should have a terrific season if it's been anything like our summer season, so I think the trend will probably continue," she said. "Different times of year we get different customers. We've been doing very well with in-state customers, and attract customers from all over the world. Europe, with a strong Euro, is a great market."

East Fort Myers

Tim Lowry, marketing manager at North Trail RV Center near Orange Grove and Interstate-75, and near Lockett Road and I-75, said those big roaming vehicles will be back in a month.

Now, the RV park is a "ghost town."

"Our season typically starts sometimes as early as mid-October and runs to Dec. 15; everyone goes back North to be with

their family for Christmas and then it explodes in January and runs until Easter.

"There's a 15 percent growth rate in the RV rental business that's been projected. That business is poised to grow."

"A lot of people always make an assumption. They say, 'you've gotta be hurting because gas prices are really high.' It's not gonna stop them from living their lifestyle."

Lowry has been in the business nine years, and said RV drivers might not come back to Florida until they know who the next president is.

"I've got a sneaking suspicion..." he said. "Really, they probably wanna get the election over so we know which direction we're going in."

At the Palm Beach Motel, a mom and pop location just off Exit 141 (Palm Beach Boulevard) on I-75, owner Bob Speer expects mostly in-state workers to continue staying there.

"We might see a few German or European tourists on occasion, but not a whole lot," he said. "This end of town, all these hotels here, they're old." Speers charges \$150 to stay for a week, and about \$40 per night.

"We cater to the hard working people out there that just can't afford the \$100 a night rates," he said. "Some of these guys that work out of the labor pool only make \$50 and people need a place to stay." ■

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