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THE INDEPENDENT

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Terrific Tourist Season Predicted

By Erica Jackson

As the weather starts to warm, the North Fork's tourist industries have started gearing up for the rush, and they are anticipating a great season, rising gas prices aside.

"More people are opting to head out to the North Fork, despite the rising price of gas," said Kristen Matejka, director of marketing for the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Heck, a nice drive vacation is much cheaper than taking a trip on an airplane. And what's better than Long Island's wine region?"

Matejka said her organization is predicting this year will be one of the best tourist seasons on the North Fork. Already, the visitors bureau has fielded more than 600 tourist-related phone calls and sent out more than 8000 information packages to tourists looking to visit Long Island. Of course, said Matejka, the packets were chock-full of information about the North Fork, including its wineries, restaurants, hotels, B&Bs, shopping, and family activities, such as Riverhead's Splish-Splash, Dinosaur Walk Museum, and Atlantis Marine World Aquarium.

"There really is so much to do here for the whole family," said Audrey Wigley, of the North Fork Promotional Council. "And that's why more families are taking vacations here."

Wigley pointed out more and more businesses are opening up to accommodate the influx of tourists. In Southold and Greenport alone, some new restaurants opened recently, including Founder's Tavern, Big Mama's and Barbeque Bill's, which is scheduled to open soon.

Aside from new restaurants, wineries are holding events and releasing new wines to entice first-time customers.

"We have already seen a surge in traffic, despite gas prices," said Steve Bate, executive director of the Long Island Wine Council. Bate estimated that over 943,000 visitors (the number of visitors last year) will visit the North Fork tasting rooms.

North Fork B&Bs are also taking advantage by offering discount coupons for those that take advantage of all the North Fork has to offer, including its farm stands, wineries, retail stores and restaurants.

New this year, said Leween Miller, head of the North Fork B& B Association, is a snooze-and-booze cruise. Those who stay at any of the North Fork B&B Association accommodations during the weekend of July 21 will have the opportunity to enjoy an hour-and-a-half boat trip, featuring wines and produce of the North Fork. The fee for the excursion? \$45.

"If it's popular, we plan to do it again," said Miller. And so far, she said, the B&Bs are booking up that weekend quickly. "We are certainly anticipating and hoping for a good season."

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