

Healthy economy, low gas prices to boost LI summer tourism

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Officials say more visitors are expected this summer at state parks, including at Jones Beach. Photo Credit: Newsday / James Carbone

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visitors bureau expects more than \$5.4B in revenue
- Leisure, hospitality industry accounts for 9% of LI jobs

As Memorial Day nears, travel and leisure experts and businesses on Long Island predict a summer tourism season better than last year's, when good weather, cheap gas and a slowly improving economy brought millions of visitors to beaches, parks, hotels, wineries and other attractions.

Leisure and travel revenue on the Island should grow slightly beyond the estimated \$5.4 billion generated last year, said Kristen Jarnagin, president and chief executive at the Long Island Convention & Visitors Bureau and Sports Commission. The latest actual figure the bureau has is for 2014, when revenue totaled \$5.3 billion. Tourism fluctuates with the economy, and the Island's travel and leisure revenue had slipped during the recession to \$4.4 billion in 2009, the visitors bureau said.

[Gas Prices](#)

The economic signs point to a strong summer season, said John Rizzo, chief economist of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business group. "The Long Island economy is healthy," he said in an email. "The labor market is strong and consumer spending appears solid overall. In addition, brisk real estate sales and a recovering stock market should bolster consumer confidence."

Employment continues to grow on the Island, with 14,700 new jobs added in April from a year earlier, state data released Wednesday showed. While positive, it was the slowest year-over-year growth since December.

Gasoline is about 50 cents per gallon cheaper than last summer, which will leave Long Islanders and visitors with more discretionary income. With some seasonal fluctuations, gasoline prices have fallen from a recent peak of \$4.036 a gallon on July 2, 2014, to \$2.416 a gallon, on average, on Thursday, according to AAA. Analysts said the decline is largely the result of a worldwide glut of crude oil that developed from higher U.S. production and a slowdown in demand from troubled economies in Asia and Europe.

Most forecasters — including the U.S. Department of Energy — expect crude oil and fuels to stay relatively cheap for the rest of this year.

Tourism is an important contributor to Long Island's economy. The industry draws 9.1 million overnight visitors a year and millions more day-trippers.

[Restaurants](#) *Your ultimate LI summer foodie bucket list*

The Labor Department said Island restaurants, hotels and other "leisure and hospitality" businesses employed a total of 120,600 people in April, up 5.3 percent from a year earlier. The leisure industry accounted for 9 percent of the total 1.3 million jobs here in April.

The summer accounts for 48 percent of visits to the Island, according to the visitors bureau. Another 22 percent come in the spring, 21 percent in autumn, and 9 percent in winter.

The bureau has begun touting the Island's attractions in ads airing during the AMC series "Turn," which depicts a Long Island-based spy ring that assisted George Washington during the Revolutionary War.

"I'm more than optimistic, I'm confident" that this year will be stronger than last year, Jarnagin said.

Last summer, some 12.5 million beachgoers, hikers, kayakers, horseback riders and anglers flocked to Long Island state parks, boosting visits more than 18 percent compared with the 2014 season, state park officials said in September.

[Hamptons](#) *Hamptons before the crowds: 6 fun things to do*

George Gorman, deputy regional director for state parks, said a key indicator signals even more visitors this season. Applications for special-use permits on Long Island issued by his agency, for activities such as four-wheel-drive use, surfing, sport and regular fishing are running 30 percent ahead of last year, he said.

“Campground reservations are up about 10 percent compared to last year, and we had a banner year last year,” he said. “We are looking for a sunny, outstanding summer.”

Weather is an unpredictable factor. A virtually rain-free July and August helped spur strong attendance last year, along with a longer season thanks to a late Labor Day. The holiday is also relatively late this year, falling on Sept. 5.

Rain washes out attendance at most attractions, although unpleasantly hot temperatures tend to keep people at home behind their air conditioners, Gorman said.

Hotel occupancy, another indicator of tourism, has been encouraging, said Jarnagin of the visitors bureau. The average occupancy this year through March was 68.3 percent, up from 64.1 percent a year earlier. The Island has almost 19,000 hotel rooms.

[MusicJones Beach concerts set for summer 2016](#)

At Gurney’s Montauk Resort & Seawater Spa in Montauk, president George Filopoulos says he expects to match last summer’s strong occupancy, despite the addition of 40 rooms from an adjacent hotel that his resort acquired last year, raising the total to 150 rooms.

Gurney’s occupancy was 95 percent in July and 98 percent in August, rates that represented a 10-12 percent increase in the number of guests, compared to the 5 percent increase the resort had forecast, Filopoulos said.

“Our summer was great,” he said. “I think we pretty much blew through all the projections.”

The one caveat, Filopoulos said: “Last year was an incredible summer with a handful of days when it rained. That’s probably going to be hard to match.”

At the 90-room Southampton Inn, owner Dede Gotthelf said international visitors helped boost occupancy last summer to 90-96 percent, and she’s optimistic about this summer. “Last year was a little better than the prior year, and it was our best year so far,” she said.

Despite a strong dollar in 2015 relative to most foreign currencies — which makes U.S. prices more expensive for foreigners — the Southampton Inn’s international business was up about 10 percent last year, she said, with visitors from South America, Germany, France and Canada accounting for most of the foreign visitors.

Gotthelf said another 30 rooms have been renovated since last summer, following refurbishment of about 60 the year before. The ballroom is in the final stages of a renovation.

“We’re finding bookings for the summer very strong and the pacing comparable to last year,” she said.

The industry includes an estimated 5,500 to 6,000 restaurants, ranging from fast-food establishments to luxury dining rooms with water views, according to the New York State Restaurant Association’s local chapter, which has 500 members and is based in Farmingdale.

Many are weather-dependent, said chapter executive vice president Mario Saccente. Rain, he said, tends to cut attendance at dining rooms with water views but increases it at restaurants inland, where many diners go when weather prevents outdoor barbecues or visits to the beach. “Last year, coastal waterfront restaurants had the best time in years [because of the good weather], while the guys in the middle of the Island were” faring worse, he said.

The Island’s wineries also anticipate a robust year at the 50 tasting rooms they operate, mostly on the North Fork, said Steven Bates, executive director of the Long Island Wine Council, based in Riverhead.

Last year, an estimated 1.3 million people visited the wineries, he said. “A lot of them come in the summer, and there’s a huge surge after Labor Day,” he said, when North Fork farm stands draw crowds seeking fresh vegetables and fruits.

“If the weather is great, we should definitely improve on that,” he said. Helping spur interest in the wineries has been recognition of the region by wine specialty publications, Bates said.

An article last summer in the influential *The Wine Advocate*, for example, gave 78 Long Island wines scores of 90 or above out of 100. *Wine Advocate* critic Mark Squires wrote, “There is plenty of evidence that the region has arrived and is on the cusp of maturity, no longer an outlier, but increasingly reliable in good vintage years.”

Bates said *The Wine Advocate* has since begun regular reviews of the region’s wines.

Long Island has 60 licensed wine producers, including three on the South Fork and one each in Smithtown, Head of the Harbor and Sayville, Bates said, but not all have tasting rooms.

His group has been experimenting in recent years with bus shuttles to the wineries from rail stations, the Tanger outlets in Riverhead and ferry terminals. Last year, 14 small buses were used in the shuttle service.

“It’s just to see if we can get people out of their cars to reduce some of the congestion,” he said.

The 96-acre Splish Splash Water Park in Calverton is one of the Island’s largest amusement parks, and ranks as the 15th largest water park in North America, with annual attendance of 421,000 in 2014, the latest for which data were available, according to a report from the Themed Entertainment Association of Burbank, California and Los Angeles-based AECOM, an engineering company. The park has added two new eating areas for this season and a retail store.

It does not disclose attendance figures or publish forecasts, but sales and marketing director Nancy Aracri said in an email, “All I can say is that last summer was a great year, the weather was very favorable. We are a weather driven business. Let’s hope for a warm and sunny summer.”

Splish Splash’s new Picnic Grove at Kahuna Bay has five large private pavilions, activity areas, and catered food selections for groups of 50 to more than 1,200.

Another amusement park, Adventureland in Farmingdale, which was founded in 1962, is counting on a bumper car ride to help boost attendance again this spring and summer, general manger Steven Gentile said. The ride can accommodate drivers as short as 44 inches, replacing one with a 54-inch minimum height requirement. “We’re getting a very strong reception to it already,” Gentile said. The family-owned park also has improved its food offerings and added another 200 seats outside, raising the total outside and under roof to 700, he said.

He said the new roller coaster “Turbulence,” installed last year, helped boost attendance — the park does not disclose figures — and another boost is expected from it this year. “We think people are feeling comfortable in the economy, and we’re seeing spending habits up,” he said.

Travel and Leisure on Long Island

Annual revenue: \$5.4 billion (2015 estimate)

Overnight visits per year: 9.1 million (estimated)

Day trips to state parks: 12.5 million (Summer 2015)

Hotel rooms: 19,000

Leisure and hospitality jobs: 120,600 (9 percent of LI workforce)

Sources: NY State Dept. of Labor; Long Island Convention & Visitors Bureau and Sports Commission; NY State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation.