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Visitors walk along the pier at the Waterfront Park in Charleston on April 23. Figures released by the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism show that, through the first half of 2015, it's been another good year for South Carolina's \$18 billion tourism industry.

Another good year for state's tourism industry

BY BRUCE SMITH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON — As the summer tourist season begins to wind down, the numbers show it's been another strong year for South Carolina's \$18 billion tourism industry.

Figures released by the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism show that through the first half of 2015, room occupancy and average room rates were both up, as was revenue per available room, a key indicator of industry health.

"Tourism is alive and well in South Carolina," said Brad Dean, president and CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. He said Monday that all the key tourism indicators are up "and the only things that are down are unemployment and gas prices."

He said increased advertising, expanded air service and lower gas prices have combined for another banner year in the Myrtle Beach area, which is the heart of the state's tourism industry.

The lodging figures were compiled by STR Inc., a company that tracks tourism trends. The company forecasts modest growth in room occupancy through the end of the summer.

The numbers provide a snapshot of South Carolina tourism:

REVENUE, RATES PER ROOM

For the calendar year through the end of June, revenue per available room was nearly \$64.50. That's an increase of more than 8 percent compared with last year. The aver-

age room rate in the state was just more than \$103, an increase of about 6 percent compared with the same period last year. Nationally, the average room rate is \$119.

ROOM OCCUPANCY

In June, room occupancy was 73 percent, an almost 2 percent increase from June of 2014. For the first half of the year, South Carolina room occupancy was just over 62 percent, again an almost 2 percent increase over 2014. There's been about a 3 percent increase in the total number of rooms sold in the state this year as compared to last year.

ADMISSIONS TAXES

Figures from the South Carolina Department of Revenue show that admission tax revenues, which include admissions to tourist attractions, were about \$36 million for the state fiscal year through the end of May, an increase of 8.5 percent from the same period the previous fiscal year.

HOT SPOTS

A report released earlier this year by the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism estimates the state receives 29 million visitors a year. The most popular destination is Horry County, where Myrtle Beach is located, followed by Charleston.

THE OUTLOOK

STR forecasts the occupancy rate statewide will be about 70 percent this month, an increase of about a half percent over August of 2014. The forecast for September is 62 percent occupancy, up about 1.3 percent over last year.