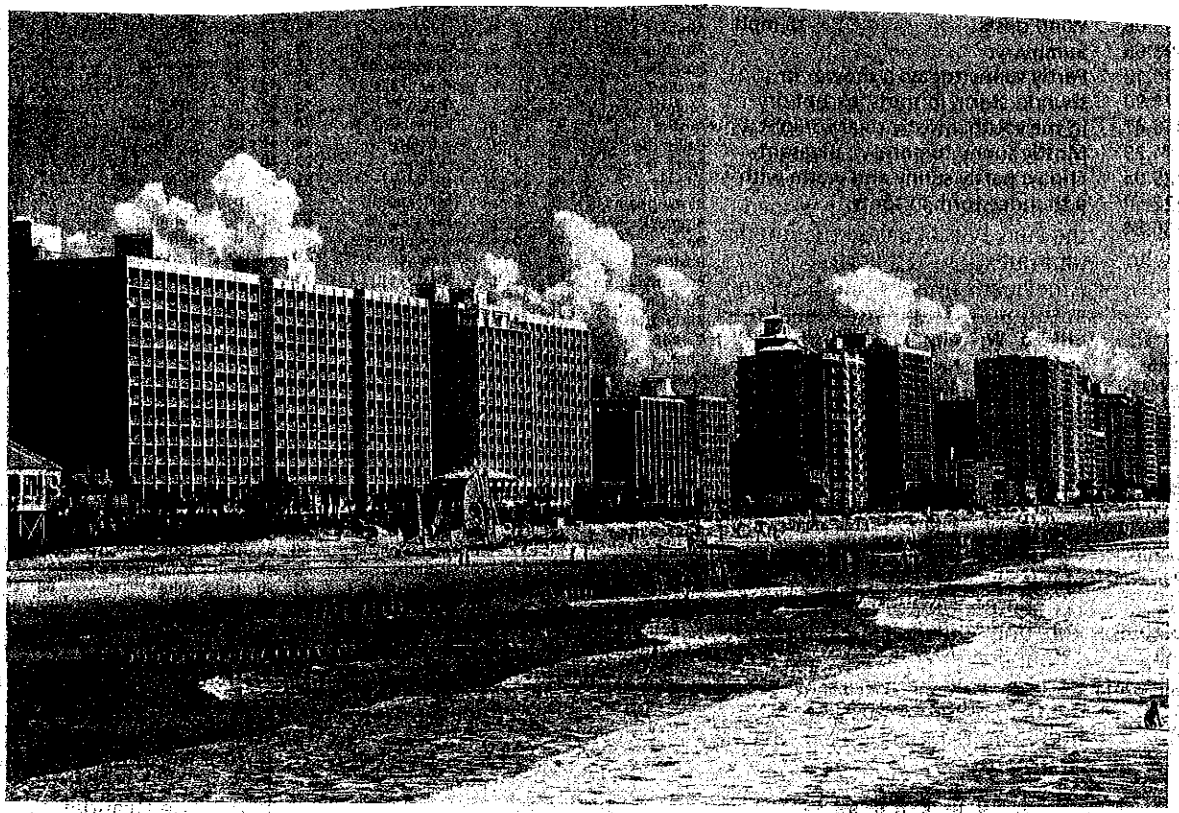


BRUCE SMITH/AP

South Carolina's beaches are one of the state's biggest draws for the tourism industry.

Record-setting tourism rolls

Summer season continued state's pace; $400M in investments planned

By Bruce Smith
Associated Press

CHARLESTON — South Carolina's $18 billion tourism industry continued its record-setting pace through the height of the summer season and another $400 million is being invested in attractions, according to figures from the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

Revenue per available room, a key indicator of the strength of the industry, is up 11 percent over last-year's record for the calendar year though the end of July, according to figures released last week. Statewide, revenue per available room is now just over $95.

For the fiscal year that ended June 30, state park revenues increased while admissions taxes kept pace with last year's record numbers. Last fiscal year, the 47 parks and historic sites in the system brought in $24 million — enough to pay for 90 percent of ongoing operations.

The department has a goal of making the state parks self-sufficient so they no longer require taxpayer money for ongoing operations.

The system is adding attractions including a splash pad water feature at Sesquicentennial State Park outside of Columbia. The system also is expanding the marina at Dreher Island State Park northwest of Columbia and adding campgrounds and cabins at several other parks.

Smith Travel Research, an independent research company that tracks travel trends, is projecting an increase of about 2 percent increase in occupancy statewide this month compared with last October. Next month, traditionally one of the slower months for tourism in the state, occupancy is expected to be down slightly.

Figures from PRT show that more than $400 million worth of new tourism attractions have been announced, have started construction or have been completed during the past year and a half in the state.

Those projects include a $50 million, multiyear upgrade at the Carowinds amusement park on the North Carolina-South Carolina state line near Rock Hill. That investment includes a 30-story roller coaster called Fury 325 in which riders will reach speeds of 95 mph. The coaster is expected to open next year.

Another new project is a $170 million development in North Augusta that includes a hotel-conference center and a stadium for the Augusta GreenJackets minor league baseball team.