METRO

Record year predicted for SC tourism

Low gas prices should help to spur a strong season

By Bruce Smith
Associated Press

The lowest gas prices in years and a robust economy should combine for another record year for South Carolina's $18 billion tourism industry.

"The economy has strengthened, fuel prices are low and consumer confidence is solid," said Brad Dean, the president and CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "The tourism industry throughout South Carolina is bullish about 2015."

"I think 2015 will be a third straight year of record numbers," added Duane Parrish, the director of the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

A key indicator for the industry, revenue per available room, was up 11.2 percent last year. Nationally, the figure was up 8.2 percent. "A good year for the country and even a better year for South Carolina," Parrish said.

The tourism season gears up this week with the Governor's Conference on Tourism and Travel in Myrtle Beach and then the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition which attracts about 40,000 visitors to Charleston.

A postcard of the South Carolina tourism industry entering the 2015 season:

Charleston still No. 1

In 2014, for the fourth straight year, Charleston was voted the top domestic tourist destination by readers of Conde Naste Traveler Magazine. It was also named the No. 2 destination worldwide.

Refurbishing Hilton Head

The resort island has almost $300 million in renovations underway to hotels and other attractions. The island already features 24 golf courses and more than 250 restaurants.

Sports tourism

The $12 million Myrtle Beach Sports Center stages its first events next month at a complex including eight basketball and 16 volleyball courts. The idea is to attract amateur tournaments and with the athletes, their families and dollars.

New events this year

The inaugural Carolina Country Music Festival will be staged on the Myrtle Beach boardwalk in June. It features 35 acts including such stars as Lady Antebellum and Big & Rich. In Charleston, May brings the Charleston Insider's Weekend. Visitors can experience Charleston's history, shopping and food at events hosted by leading magazine editors and locals.

Air connections

"There are more direct flights to more major cities from our state than there have ever been in the past," Parrish said. That helps, he said, when 20 percent of visitors arrive by air.

Gas prices

Gas prices always climb into the summer months. But Dean said prices don't seem to discourage visitation until they reach $4 a gallon or so. Parish expects them to stay below $3.