

AMI has 'hot ticket' for summer tourism

By Rick Catlin, Islander Reporter, July 2012

If the good weather that followed the passage of Tropical Storm Debby remains through late August, expect an abundance of visitors to Anna Maria Island, says Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce president Mary Ann Brockman.

"If we don't get a storm like Debby, it's going to be a great summer season, better than last year," Brockman predicted.

"There's been nothing but good news from the rental agents and owners. Tourism to the Island has not slowed down since a brief spell in May. Usually, June tourism is slow, but not this year," she said.

The Island's summer tourist season used to be a time when accommodation owners and managers would renovate their properties, close for a few weeks for their own vacations, or just get ready for the coming winter season, she said.

Not so these days, Brockman noted.

"We have become so well known, plus the economy makes the Island a good value," she said.

Brockman said the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau has done a "fantastic job" of advertising the Island's "old Florida charm," and as a family destination, particularly for people living in Florida and the southeast.

Brockman said AMI is getting a lot of stay-cations. "They're coming from Lakeland, Orlando, everywhere in Florida, plus Georgia and other states in the southeast. They can drive here in one day."

Brockman said she spoke recently with a Kentucky family coming for vacation that was pleased by the old Florida lifestyle, but wanted to be close enough to attractions for their kids.

With an average nightly room-rate of about \$130 in the summer months, the Island is very attractive to families who want value for their money, said David Teitelbaum, owner of four resort hotels in Bradenton Beach, and a board member for the chamber and the Manatee County Tourist Council.

"The value-for-dollar here is much better than one gets in Orlando, Miami or other Florida tourist destinations," Teitelbaum said.

"You can't get the old Florida look and feel anywhere else in this state for the price," he said, sounding much like a walking advertisement for the Island. And he has good reason to be positive.

"We also are very-well booked this summer," he said. "There are a few room nights here and there, but anyone thinking of an Island vacation shouldn't wait until the last minute to call, or they might be out of luck."

“With four properties, we can usually find a place for someone, but the larger apartments that sleep six are in demand and renting fast,” he said.

Zita Kollar of Gulf-Bay Real Estate agreed with Teitelbaum. People shouldn’t wait until the last minute to call for a reservation.

“Call now if you want to get a good rental at the time you want,” she said, although she had few units available the week of July 4.

For other summer dates, their managed properties are renting almost as quickly as she, husband Jesse Brisson, and mom Robin Kollar can answer the phones, she said.

“I’m positive we are going to be well ahead of last July. It’s all good,” Zita Kollar said.

Larry Chatt at Island Real Estate, with nearly 300 properties to manage, echoed Zita Kollar’s sentiments.

“Knock on wood. If the weather remains good through August, it’s going to be a great season, probably the best. We’re up 30 percent from last year at this time for advance reservations,” he said.

Chatt is in good company when he says book now, don’t wait until a few days before you want to come.

Many smaller motels on the Island are experiencing a booming summer season, just like their larger counterparts.

Bonnie Wright at the Rod & Reel Motel, Anna Maria, said she had a few nights available the week of July 4, but those were filling up fast. For August, the motel is booked nearly 100 percent, she said.

“People like to come here because it’s quiet and old Florida. There’s the Rod & Reel Pier for fishing and a good restaurant there, and we have a beach area. It’s all going to be great this summer,” she said.

Ed Chiles, owner of the Sandbar, Mar Vista and BeachHouse restaurants, agreed this summer season should be a record-breaker, but good weather is needed, at least for the next six weeks.

“We are in the heart of the summer season and summer business has been great, except for (Tropical Storm) Debby. If we can continue to have excellent weather, everyone’s going to have a fantastic summer of business,” Chiles predicted.

Brockman said the chamber maintains an up-to-date list of member properties and agencies that have vacancies. Anyone arriving on Anna Maria Island without a reservation can call the chamber at 941-778-1541, or visit the office at 5313 Gulf Drive, Holmes Beach, for assistance.