

Tourism Industries Hoping for Stability in Numbers

Cruise ships from Vancouver and Seattle have set sail for Alaska and will be here in a couple of weeks.

Some tourism businesses are hoping to boost their visitor appeal.



The Alaska Native Heritage Center is getting ready for what it hopes will be a busy summer tourism season. "I know that there's been predictions for fewer tourists this year, but we did better than we thought we would last year, so there's no reason not to stay optimistic," said David Farve with the center.

With several new projects this summer, including the carving of four totem poles, the center is confident their visitor numbers will remain stable.

"We'd love a blockbuster year; everybody would love a blockbuster year. We're a nonprofit so we depend a lot on our summer revenues to keep the lights on, the heat on, but we make do and we make the changes we have," Farve said.

But one of the state's tourism industry leaders is anticipating another tough year. About 883,000 cruise ship visitors are forecast to come to Alaska this summer; down 14 percent from approximately 1 million in 2009. The good news is that some ships will dock in Anchorage on a regular basis – each Monday for nine weeks.

"I think for retail and our restaurants and our day attractions, they're going to see a nice little bump on those Mondays, certainly," said Julie Saupe, CEO of the Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau.



Also this season, there are fewer big deals from tourism businesses than were offered last year.

The Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau says the state tourism industry would like to return to normalcy. Rather than further decreases, Saupe says she hopes visitor numbers, and the rates companies can charge for services, will begin to stabilize this year.

"This year I think people are a little bit more calm approaching the season. They've got some decent numbers on the books; they're not expecting to fall off the cliff like we did last year," Saupe said.

Even though cruise ships drew in large crowds last year with deep discounts, John Binkley with the Alaska Cruise Association says those passengers didn't spend very much on land. "Last year was kind of disappointing on the amount of money that passengers spent when they got off the ships, and hopefully with the turnaround in the economy, some of that will come back and they'll be a little more generous, a little more optimistic and spend a little more money here in Anchorage," Binkley said.



Binkley runs a riverboat tour company in Fairbanks, and said that he too has had to tighten his belt by cutting 70 of his company's 200 jobs. "Last year we were down about 25 percent, and this year we'll be down probably similarly: 20 to 25 percent additionally on top of that," he said.

Businesses big and small across the state are hoping for an improvement in sales over last year. "The phone has definitely been ringing more than last year," said Glen Hemingson, the manager of the Copper Whale Inn in downtown Anchorage. Hemingson says he's tried different things this year like focused marketing in Europe and additional online advertising to hopefully attract visitors. "We're anticipating about 10 to 15 percent higher occupancy than we saw, which is still not where we were in 2007, 2008," he said.



Photos: Alaska Travel Industry Association

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