

MAUI TOURISM SPARKS ANGER AMID FIRE RUINS



The incongruous spectacle of tourists enjoying Maui's tropical beaches as search and rescue teams search building ruins and waters for victims of the deadliest U.S. fire in over a century has outraged some residents.

They have spoken on social media, posting videos of tourists engaging in holiday activities such as snorkeling. This the death toll in the historic resort of Lahaina exceeds 115 and rises by the day.

Authorities and businesses on Maui welcomed the arrival of a few travelers, saying it would ease the blow to the island's economy. According to its economic development council, the island relies heavily on tourism, which is Maui's "economic engine" and generates 80% of its wealth.

As Maui begins a long and painful recovery from the fires, authorities struggle to balance residents' immediate housing and resource needs with the island's long-term financial health.

The Maui tourism sector was hit hard in the week following the devastation of Lahaina by the fire. Lahaina was a popular vacation destination that also housed historical sites important to the people of Hawaii.

According to the Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, the number of air passengers to Maui has dropped nearly 81 percent from the same period last year.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.9 million tourists visited Maui in 2022. The island has a year-round population of 165,000. In February, the state's tourism department reported that visitors spent \$ 5.69 billion on Maui in 2022.

The Hawaii Tourism Authority is asking visitors to avoid all non-essential travel to West Maui, the part of the island affected by the fires, so resources can be used to help locals recover.

West Maui hotels have temporarily stopped accepting reservations. According to the tourism authority, many are housing their employees and preparing to welcome evacuees and rescuers working to rehabilitate the island.

The agency urged visitors from Maui areas that didn't burn — such as Kahului, Wailuku, Kihei, Wailea and Makena — to contact their facility to ensure they can still be accommodated.

Tour operators who continued to offer services in or around West Maui after the fires faced a flood of criticism.

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