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Strong holiday travel season predicted for S. Florida

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Are you ready for packed planes, roads and hotel rooms this holiday season?

Airlines flying to and from South Florida as well as hotels in the region likely will see higher consumer

demand for tickets and rooms for the 2017 year-end holiday travel season, kicking off with Thanksgiving Day, industry specialists say.

Helping to fuel the bookings uptick is a shortfall in room inventory and airline seats in parts of the Carib-

bean still recovering from Hurricanes Maria and Irma. In addition, general consumer optimism over the strong U.S. economy is triggering the spending.

"In general the economic winds are positive, the stock market remains bullish and the U.S. consumer

[spending] reporting is very upbeat," said Scott Berman, a hotel and tourism analyst at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Miami. "And in airlift news, we've got more seats and more destinations at the three airports than

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TRAVEL

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we've ever had."

South Florida will likely get a boost from displacement business being funneled from hurricane-damaged Caribbean destinations like Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Martin, and other islands where some tourism assets remain closed this holiday season, he said. "That's to our benefit, although we're not the only beneficiary."

Lower Thanksgiving average airfares and more flight and destination options are offering travelers greater flexibility and variety from South Florida airports, travel experts say.

"Demand for Fort Lauderdale and Miami has really increased and hotels are fuller too, with rates inching up," said George Hobbica, president of Airfarewatchdog.com. "It's stronger than in the past year."

Fort Lauderdale ranks among AAA Travel's top 10 Thanksgiving destinations in 2017 based on bookings on AAA.com. Both cities are also counted among the top 25 busiest U.S. airports for Thanksgiving travel, according to research from airfare app Hopper and InsureMyTrip.com.

Others attest to the positive trends at play.

"Post Hurricane Irma we have seen an uptick in business and to some of us it was kind of bittersweet because of the suffering" caused by



SUSAN STOCKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mark and Marina Kogan, of Brooklyn, N.Y. are staying at a Fort Lauderdale beach hotel. Hotel demand and rates are up over last year, industry experts say.

cies not seen in recent years, Fernandez said. Thanksgiving weekend is also expected to sell out.

In Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, newcomer Plunge Beach Hotel still has availability for Thanksgiving holiday weekend, but rooms are filling up quickly for December weekends when it's expected to be sold out, general manager Tom Mulroy said.

The 163-room oceanfront hotel, which opened in April, will also host an influx of New England Patriots fans for the National Football League team's Dec. 11 faceoff with the Miami Dolphins. "We've had four and five-day reservation blocks for months now," Mulroy said.

The Thanksgiving holiday week is also trending well for the 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach, where many rooms have been booked for USA Field Hockey events in Palm

the start of what will likely become the busiest holiday season in more than a decade," said AAA spokeswoman Vicky Evans. "A strong economy and labor market are generating rising incomes and higher consumer confidence. These factors should help fuel consumer spending and generate a strong finish for the travel industry this year."

More people are opting to fly this Thanksgiving season, likely swayed by cheaper average airfares and rising gasoline prices, AAA said.

South Florida airports in turn are prepping for holiday crowds, especially with several new routes and flights added in 2017.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport is anticipating 670,000 travelers to pass through Nov. 21 to 27 — a 13 percent increase from the same 2016 period, spokesman Greg Meyer said.

the hurricanes, said Eduardo Fernandez, general manager of Sonesta Fort Lauderdale Beach. "And most of us believe that this will continue into 2018."

To some extent the hurricane damage in the Caribbean and parts of the Florida Keys reduced travel options for booking conventions, vacations and weddings, he said.

"So because of that South Florida becomes a really attractive, safe and relatively inexpensive destination, so we are cautiously optimistic," Fernandez said.

The 240-room Sonesta hotel's November and October business has been very strong with high occupan-

Beach County, general manager John Parkinson said.

The Hilton's room bookings for mid-December through early January are also pacing about 7 percent ahead of last year, Parkinson said. "There is some very strong demand for West Palm Beach over the holidays."

In all, 2.6 million Floridians will be among 50.9 million Americans expected to travel 50 miles or more from home between Nov. 22 and Nov. 26, AAA said in its annual forecast released Thursday.

That's up 3.2 percent statewide and 3.3 percent nationally from last year.

"Thanksgiving kicks off

The Fort Lauderdale airport's peak day will be Saturday, with 110,000 passengers, Meyer said.

At Miami International Airport nearly 1.5 million holiday travelers are expected between Nov. 17-28, up 31 percent from last year, spokesman Greg Chin said.

Palm Beach International Airport is forecasting 160,000-170,000 travelers to pass through for Thanksgiving week, with its busiest days coming before the holiday, spokeswoman Lacy Larson said.

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