

County Tourism Continues to Ride the Wave

By Sean Doherty

Where did you go on vacation in 2021? While some chose to sit the year out due to the lingering pandemic, the pent-up demand drove many to seek a getaway to relax and feel some sense of normalcy again. With restrictions still in place in many destinations, travelers were enticed to be creative with their vacation planning and were more flexible in their decision-making and willingness to try something new. Instead of hitting their go-to spots like busy theme parks, crowded beaches or high-traffic metro areas, many chose to take their families to somewhere a little more off the beaten path. That's where we came in. Charlotte County's array of outdoor recreational offerings such as fishing, boating, golfing, and kayaking, as well as our beaches and nature tours, are just what the doctor ordered to satisfy that pent-up desire for families and couples to reconnect and recharge the batteries in a safe environment.

As a result, our destination's economy benefitted greatly, particularly those businesses aligned with our local hospitality industry. Our visitor tracking research for Fiscal Year 2021 indicates that approximately 863,000 people visited the county, which represents a 23.4% increase from FY 2020. These vacationers spent more than \$844 million helping support approximately 10,752 jobs by generating more than \$248 million in wages and salaries. But you don't need to be part of the hospitality industry to benefit from tourism, as tax dollars raised through visitor expenditures saved the average household in Charlotte County approximately \$875 off their tax liability last year. In addition, visitor tax dollars greatly contribute to the 1% local option sales tax projects and on a larger scale, Florida does not implement a state income tax due to the contributions from tourism statewide.

Looking ahead, what's new for 2022? At the Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau we recently launched our fully redesigned PureFlorida.com website. The new site has improved, intuitive navigation and fresh, dynamic content. New features, such as user-generated content and a lodging referral engine have also been implemented to enhance and streamline the user's experience. The launch coincided with the release of our 2022 Visitor Guide which is available in both print and digital versions.

The new year also brings the return of the Snowbird Baseball Classic which was cancelled in 2021. We're excited to have this premier event back as it infuses millions of dollars into our economy and generates thousands of room nights for our lodging partners. This year, 30 collegiate baseball teams are scheduled to participate Feb. 18-March 19, with most games taking place at Centennial Park. For information, visit snowbirdbaseball.com.

Another big event coming back is the Association of Pickleball Professionals Punta Gorda Open. Last year, the event, which carries a \$40,000 prize purse, attracted 700 domestic and international participants. This year's event, scheduled for Feb. 23-27, will again be held at the PicklePlex of Punta Gorda and is projected to generate more than \$1 million in total economic impact. On the arts and culture side, the Peace River Botanical and Sculpture Gardens was selected to host Zimsculpt, a world-renowned exhibit which only makes one stop in North America each year. The event is expected to draw visitors from all over the country from Feb. 4-Apr. 18.

While our destination has fared well from a tourism standpoint despite the pandemic, the future is even brighter with the anticipated opening of Sunseeker Resort Charlotte Harbor in 2023. This addition to our tourism product will open the door to attracting a variety of meetings, conferences and other group business to the destination.

As residents, we're fortunate not only to live in this paradise, but also to share it with family, friends and visitors whose economic contributions make Charlotte County such a great place to live, work and play.

So, wherever you go on vacation in 2022, be safe and have fun in someone else's backyard but don't forget to tell them about ours.

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