



National publicity sparks interest in Island

By Cindy Lane | sun staff writer

Vacationers longing for a laid-back, old-time Florida beach vacation during the holidays found it on Anna Maria Island, courtesy of USA Today, Baltimore Magazine and the Internet.

"It was more crowded than ever over the holidays," said resort owner David Teitelbaum, whose interview on Bay News 9 on Monday contributed to the media momentum, causing phones to ring persistently at the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce.

"Our business at the resorts has been phenomenal," said Teitelbaum, a Chamber director and member of the Manatee County Tourist Development Council. His resorts, Tradewinds, Tortuga Inn and Seaside, sleep 450 people in 100 units and were full, he said. "It's the best holiday we've ever had."

January reservations are double what they were in January 2008 at Island Real Estate, General Manager Larry Chatt said, adding, "February and March are already up 20 percent from last year."

A recent USA Today article is responsible for a good portion of the last-minute reservations (made within 20 days of a visit) over the holidays, he said.

"In last-minute reservations, we were triple last year," he said.

According to Chamber figures, visitors increased by 311 percent, with new visits up 280 percent and Internet search engine traffic up 240 percent, Teitelbaum said, adding that some of the activity is a direct result of recent news stories.

In its current issue, Baltimore Magazine calls the Island "a mostly unknown strip of paradise" that serves as a hideaway for celebrities Stephen King, Jerry Springer, Maria Sharapova, Graeme Edge and Jimmy Van Zandt.

It's a great place to escape Tampa's Super Bowl crowds on Feb. 1 and relax in a beach chair, according to the writer, who recommends the Sandbar, Beach Bistro and Gulf Drive Café for dining and Bridgewalk, Tortuga Inn and Harrington House Bed and Breakfast for accommodations.

Ringling Museum, Bishop Planetarium and St. Armands Circle also get mentions, as do "poky oldsters" forcing vacationers to slow down and relax on the roads – whether they want to or not.

In a Dec. 12 article, USA Today praises what the Island does not have – high-rise condos, chain hotels, fast food burger joints and rowdy, Key West-style sunsets – as much as what it offers.

Shabby chic accommodations full of colorful, Island-style character are featured and recommended, particularly Cedar Cove and Harrington House.

Low motel prices, "funky" stores like Ginny's and Jane E's, art galleries, fishing, the free trolley, festivals, beach weddings, dining and herons crossing the road all rate a mention in the story, which drew some of the holiday visitors, Teitelbaum said.

Apparently it's no contradiction for visitors to do a high-tech search to find a low-tech beach destination.

"Activity on our resort Web sites is tied closely together with activity on the Chamber site," he said.

A search on Monday for "Anna Maria Island" on the www.google.com Web site calls up the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce Web site in first and second places on page one, with the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Web site on page two.

Combined with the county's public relations efforts in Germany and the United Kingdom, the Internet Web sites and news articles have created a buzz about the beaches, with January tourism up 20 percent from this time last year, he said.

"I think the fact that we're a reasonably priced destination is starting to pay off," he said. "They're slashing rates in Orlando and Miami, but they were overpriced in the first place. We're value oriented."

The hotelier expects the trend to continue.

"We expect to have a better January than last year, which was a good January," he said.

Chatt agrees that it's blue skies ahead for Island tourism in 2009.

"Every year there's a point in time that someone up North turns on the 'light switch' and the phones here start ringing off the hook," he said. "That occurred on Friday."

To view the stories, visit www.baltimoremagazine.net or www.usatoday.com.