



# Tourism outlook sunny in 2015

**SunSentinel**

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The 349-room Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort is set to open summer 2015. (Susan Stocker / Sun Sentinel)

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Sun Sentinel

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DECEMBER 31, 2014, 4:13 PM

**G**et used to the tourists, because even more are expected in 2015.

Hotels will be more crowded, and room rates will rise, tourism leaders say.

The New Year also will bring several new hotels across the tri-county region, giving visitors more places to stay on business or leisure trips.

The optimism is fueled by a strong performance in 2014 as consumer confidence, the jobs market and other economic indicators continued to improve.

"Our forecast and expectations for 2014 were exceeded, and everything is in place for further growth in 2015," said Nicki E. Grossman, president and CEO of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau.

**Broward County** in 2014 welcomed 14 million visitors who spent \$11.4 billion, according to the tourism bureau's data. About 500,000 more tourists are expected in 2015.

Visitors from Brazil are expected to grow more than 5 percent as a result of aggressive marketing and flights from South American airlines Azul Brazilian and Tame, Grossman said.

On Dec. 2, Azul launched long-awaited non-stop service between Fort Lauderdale and Sao Paulo/Campinas International Airport. Ecuadorian carrier Tame began flying in October between Fort Lauderdale and Quito.

More visitors from northern Europe and the United Kingdom also are expected due to increased service from carriers such as Norwegian Air, which started service between Fort Lauderdale and London Gatwick in July 2014. In late 2013, the Scandinavian low-cost carrier began weekly service between Fort Lauderdale and Oslo, Norway; Stockholm, Sweden; and Copenhagen, Denmark.

"Our international visitor numbers will be closer to 6 percent [growth] over 2014, rather than the 4 percent we initially forecast," Grossman said.

Tourism also is expected to get a boost if same-sex marriage becomes legal in Florida in 2015.

The Broward tourism marketing bureau is already planning a massive gay-wedding celebration on the beach with at least 100 couples.

"2015 is likely to be a breakout year for all of our indicators — occupancy, average daily rate, total visitor numbers and spending," Grossman said.

Tourism officials in **Palm Beach County** also forecast more tourists, industry jobs and spending.

"The outlook for 2015 continues to be positive with visitors growing to 6.6 million, and a total economic impact of \$7.5 billion — a 5.5 percent increase" from 2014, said Jorge Pesquera, president and CEO of Discover The Palm Beaches, the county's official tourism marketer.

Tourism growth in 2015 — buoyed by economic recovery, improvements in the national and state jobs market and other factors — is expected to support more than 66,000 jobs overall, he said. That's an increase of 6,000 jobs year to year.

A closer marketing alliance with Visit Florida and Brand USA, the state's and nation's official tourism promoters, and the availability of extra marketing dollars from a 6-cent bed-tax rate increase, also bode well for continued tourism growth, Pesquera said.



The Fairfield Inn & Suites on Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach is expected to open in late January. (Amy Beth Bennett / Sun Sentinel)

Potential growth areas include international travelers from Latin America and Europe, as well as drivers from nearby areas, if cheap gas prices linger into summer and fall.

Starting in January, Discover The Palm Beaches' new TV campaign, "Unplug and Reconnect," will air in key markets such as New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. The commercial debuted on ESPN during the Dec. 23 national broadcast of the inaugural **Boca Raton Bowl** at FAU Stadium.

Still, while **Palm Beach County** has seen 58 consecutive months of improving performance, the growth of hotel occupancy is likely to slow slightly as about 1,000 additional rooms become available between now to take reservations by phone and on its website in January, General Manager Cate Farmer said.

Already, the 349-room Hollywood resort is seeing high demand for meetings and special event bookings, which should grow in 2015 and beyond, Farmer said.

Also slated for a summer opening is the Conrad Fort Lauderdale Beach Residences, a 290-unit condo-hotel in Fort Lauderdale.

In **Palm Beach County**, the 95-room Fairfield Inn & Suites in **Delray Beach** is scheduled to open in late January, a hotel spokesman said Wednesday. And the 152-suite Residence Inn Marriott West Palm Beach Downtown should open in February, according to Marriott.com.

"Growth in room supply isn't the only economic engine in the area," Scott Brush, a Miami-based lodging industry consultant, said of South Florida's tourism outlook in 2015. "New offices, condominiums, rental complexes and dining and entertainment venues all have a positive effect on hotel demand to a greater or lesser degree."

Continued growth in the number of passengers arriving at local airports and seaports bode well for tourism, Brush said.

Hoteliers share the upbeat forecast.

"We are beyond excited about what is in store for us and the destination in 2015," said Eduardo Fernandez, general manager Sonesta Fort Lauderdale at 999 N. Fort Lauderdale Beach Blvd.

Formerly the B Ocean Fort Lauderdale, the 240-room oceanfront hotel officially joined Sonesta in May after a change of ownership earlier in the year.

In coming months, the Sonesta hotel plans upgrades to its food and beverage offerings, new seating and color schemes in public spaces, new pool cabanas and enhanced landscaping, Fernandez said.