

## Tourists, not workers, flock to Cape



By Jay Fitzgerald

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Summer forecast for the tourism industry after a successful Memorial Day weekend: Sunny with intermittent labor shortages.

A combination of high gas prices, a weak U.S. dollar and excellent weather contributed to a solid Memorial Day weekend for the region's hotels, restaurants and other tourism-related businesses, industry experts said yesterday.

And the hope is that the large crowds that flocked to the Cape and other regional vacation spots over the Memorial Day break will keep coming back right through the summer months.

"It was a wonderful weekend," said Bill Zammer, owner of the Coonamessett Inn in Falmouth.

"The Cape and islands were overrun," said Peter Martell, owner of the Wesley Hotel in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard. "There was a lot of last-minute customers. We're expected a fairly strong season.'



As expected, high gas prices - now hovering in the \$4-per-gallon range - kept people from venturing too far this year.

A weak U.S. dollar also means that even some affluent Americans are balking at going overseas, where their purchasing power has been reduced, industry officials say.

A weak dollar also accounted for a large number of tourists from Europe, Asia and Canada descending on the region.

But a potentially solid summer could exacerbate an old summer problem for the industry: a lack of employees.

"Everything is looking great - if we have enough workers," said Zammer, noting there's a great need for cooks, housekeepers and other workers on the Cape.

Regional tourism businesses have long bemoaned the lack of workers who can staff hotels, restaurants and other seasonal establishments.

But the problem is more acute this year because Congress failed to extend an exemption allowing foreign employees who have previously worked here on H-2B visas to automatically return this summer.

"It's just this patchwork of solutions" to the labor problem, said Wendy Northcross, president of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce.

She noted that employers are paying overtime to many employees, hiring senior citizens on flexible work schedules, adjusting hours of operations and taking other measures to get work done.