

Tourists can't wait 'til summer

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Kevin Napolitan, 17, helps out yesterday at his dad's West Yarmouth restaurant, Golden Boy Seafood, because of the influx of diners.

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Edel Byrne, owner of Glass Gazebo in Provincetown, normally doesn't open her shop featuring her fine glassware until May 2, she said yesterday afternoon. However, while down this weekend to inspect her shop for the summer season, the weather was so nice she decided to stay, keeping her store open while she worked.

"I wasn't expecting this many people," she said of the sheer number of visiting tourists and the volume of business. "It's busier than people expected, with the holiday and school vacation. The parking lots in Provincetown are full. It kicked off a little early, but the vendors all around are pretty happy."

Besides school vacations and holidays, the Cape's influx of early visitors has been brought on by many factors from high gas prices to the strength of the euro, from the weather to the feeding North Atlantic right whales in Cape Cod Bay, business owners and visitors said.

The early start to the season — and the tourists — has had an effect on area businesses for better or for worse as they scramble to keep up with demand for their services.

"I've found that this whole year, since January, has been much busier than last year," said Voula Nikolakopoulos, general manager of the Tidewater Inn on Main Street in West Yarmouth. "Business has been up 30-40 percent in January and February. This month is also up so far."

Nikolakopoulos added that some businesses were caught by surprise by the surge in tourist activity. Rick Napolitan, managing partner of Golden Boy Seafood on Route 28 in West Yarmouth, had to call in his two sons to help out yesterday. The restaurant relies on the help of high schoolers in the tourist season, and hasn't finished its summer hiring yet. "We've seen a lot of activity," he said. "It started at lunch Friday and it hasn't stopped since."

Napolitan said that the strength of the euro has even brought almost 30 foreign tourists in from Norway and Sweden. But it hasn't ended there. The weather has brought out the locals as well. This weekend was the most profitable compared with the same weekend in years past, he said.

But not all that glitters is gold. Nikolakopoulos said she usually brings in nine summer workers on H-2B visas, but because of the expiration last year of the federal exemption that allowed returning workers to obtain a visa more easily, she cannot bring in any former employees this year. She said that she has taken out advertisements for local workers but said she is skeptical they will fill the roles as enthusiastically as her foreign help.

"Locals usually last about a month," she said. "This year will be a struggle. They are like family. Its a win-win for both sides. I'm definitely going to miss them."

Jake Franzreb, 18, of Osterville, an employee at Wild Animal Lagoon, a Route 28 minigolf course in West Yarmouth, said that the traffic on Route 28 has gotten noticeably thicker the past few days. He has even witnessed more than one car crash.

"This is our third spring break here," said Daniel Hardrick of South Windsor, Conn., as he played a round of minigolf yesterday day with his wife, Deirdre, and his two young girls. "Gas prices are high, so we decided to do something local with the economy being the way it is. ... I'm all about convenience."

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