

## Visitors down, but season acceptable, businesses say

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Fresh off a summer when news of continuing economic decline monopolized national headlines, many Nantucket business owners said this season has been comparable to the past few, despite the higher cost of gas and food, as well as the absence of many seasonal foreign workers.

Despite fewer passengers by sky and sea reaching the island, according to Nantucket Memorial Airport and the boat lines, SeaGrille restaurant owner Robin Harvey said she felt the summer was comparable to past seasons.

"Even though our numbers were the same, without our H-2B visa people we've had to hire, so our payroll is up," she said. "It was difficult filling the vacancies of our Jamaican staff. They were strong workers and a part of our family. We miss them."

Le Languedoc Bistro on Broad Street, an inn as well as a restaurant, also suffered from the loss of the H-2B workers, closing for a day for the first time in 34 years, as well as suspending lunch service on Mondays. Despite the setbacks, owner Alan Cunha is optimistic.

"We are very comfortable with our numbers, and I think that has a lot to do with support from locals and second-home owners," said Cunha. "Our numbers were solid, but we did see a slip in our room revenues. There are less tourist dollars."

Mitch Carl, owner of the Hawthorn House and president of the Nantucket Lodging Association, believes that overall the inns did well.

"I've spoken to a lot of the smaller inns, and most of them had good years," said Carl. "There are natural lulls, for instance the last week in August, when families leave for school. Having the festivals early in the season helps spring and early-summer business. We're a humble, nine-room guest house. We really can't complain about this season at all."

With surging gas prices, bicycle riding has become an inexpensive and healthy alternative to using a car. Noah Learner, the general manager of Young's Bicycle Shop on Broad Street, found bike and car rentals up during the summer season.

"If there's any silver lining in \$5 gas, it's that maybe people will drive a little less," said Learner. "We were excited with how August went, specifically because of all the news with how the economy was nationwide."

"The tone of the economy right now is that people are very conservative in their spending," said Tracy Bakalar, executive director of the Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce. "People will still go on vacation, even if the economy is weak, but they will adjust their spending once they're on vacation. Everyone's out enjoying the free beach instead of in town spending money."

With skyrocketing gas prices making travel increasingly difficult, Bakalar and the Chamber of Commerce has begun targeting who they refer to as "tank-away clientele" – those that can drive to the Cape on less than a tank of gas.

"I felt that people who couldn't afford a week out here decided to stay for a weekend," said Kate Hamilton Pardee of Nantucket Visitor Services. "What we do want is for people to continue to come out. Maybe if they can come for weekends, if things improve they'll come for another week."

According to the Steamship Authority, fast-ferry passenger ridership in August was down 10.9 percent compared with August 2007. Automobiles and slow-ferry passengers both are down less than 2 percent from last year. Hy-Line Cruises also was down in its numbers, losing more than 3,000 passengers in 2008 compared to the 2007 summer season.

Murray Scudder, vice president of Hy-Line Cruises, believes part of the decline lies in the absence of day-trippers.

"Their numbers (day-trippers) have been going down every year," said Scudder. "The demographic has changed."

Nantucket Memorial Airport also reported fewer passengers, with a 3.81 percent decline in July.

In response to any losses at the beginning of summer, Bakalar and the Chamber are increasing fall marketing by continuing events during September and October. The arts festival began the fall season during the first week in September. Restaurant Week is scheduled to take place Sept. 29-Oct. 5, in which islanders and tourists alike can receive a three-course meal at select Nantucket restaurants for only \$35 to \$45. Fall events will continue with the annual Christmas Stroll during the first weekend in December and Nantucket Noel throughout the month.