

# Island spring break is family affair

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Don't look now, but Anna Maria Island could be over-run with spring breakers this week and next.

Islanders and beach goers, however, can rest easy. Spring breakers on Anna Maria Island are not the same spring break crowd that over-runs Panama Beach, Clearwater Beach, South Beach and Daytona Beach at this time of year, Island accommodation owners and managers say.

On the Island, spring breakers are families with kids and area residents who head back to the mainland when the sun goes down.



Photo by Jack Elka

“We don't even advertise for spring breakers,” said Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce president Mary Ann Brockman.

“If they come here, they come with their families. The spring break crowd is looking for places like Panama Beach or South Beach for the nightlife and entertainment. They're just not going to find that here. And that's the way we like it,” she emphasized.

David Teitelbaum, who owns the Tortuga Inn, Tradewinds and Seaside resorts in addition to being both a tourist development council member and Island chamber of commerce executive, said Anna Maria Island's target market for Easter-spring break is the Midwest and Florida.

“We’re a family destination. We don’t have a lot for spring-breakers to do at night and we really don’t advertise for that crowd,” he said.

“What we do get on the Island for spring break is local kids who head to Coquina Beach or Manatee Public Beach for the day, then go back to Bradenton.”

Bradenton Beach Police Chief Sam Speciale agreed.

Easter is one of the biggest holidays of the year and he’s already made plans with the Manatee County Sheriff’s Office for a strong law enforcement presence on Coquina Beach that weekend.

“Coquina Beach is where the locals go. It’ll be busy that weekend,” he predicted.

#### Accommodations

Judging by advance reservations for the Easter holiday, the Island doesn’t need any Panama City-type spring-breakers to fill its rooms.

“March was gangbusters for occupancy,” said Teitelbaum, “and for Easter, we’re way ahead of last year. In fact, we’re sold out Easter weekend. We’ve gotten a number of referrals and repeat visitors for April, so the spring-break crowd would have a hard time finding a room.”

Likewise at the White Sands Resort in Holmes Beach, where co-owner Jeff Gerry said he was sold out for March and resort bookings are strong through Easter.

“We have many returning guests, people who stay with us every year. It’s been a good season and we’re hoping this keeps up through April,” Gerry said.

At Haley’s Motel in Holmes Beach, owner Tom Buehler said he has no interest in attracting spring breakers and doesn’t need them to fill up the motel every night.

“Right now, I only have one room left for Easter, and I expect that will be taken very soon. We don’t really want the spring-breakers. No thanks. They can go to Panama City. They want that crowd. We manage quite well without them.”

Angela Rodocker of the BridgeWalk Resort in Bradenton Beach said a few rooms are still available for Easter, but she expects those to be gone by the time the holiday arrives.

“We’re getting a lot of walk-in traffic. People aren’t booking that far in advance like they used to, so the traffic is different for us. But we are getting the bookings. People should book in advance for Easter, however,” she said.

“We weren’t sure what the season would bring, so we’ve been pleasantly surprised. It’s been better than expected. It’s been a good season.”

Rodocker also dismissed any notion that the Island and its accommodations attract spring breakers.

“We get families and that’s what we encourage. We don’t even rent to anyone under 21,” she said.

## Weddings

While the Island isn’t marketed toward traditional spring breakers, a market that is rapidly becoming worthy of advertising dollars is the wedding business.

Teitelbaum said that the number of weddings on the Island has increased dramatically the past five years.

“Five years ago, there were probably 200 to 300 weddings on the Island a year. I estimate this year there will be about 700. We’re going to hold about 400 just at our resorts,” he said.

Beach weddings have become big business on the Island. This year’s second annual Island Wedding Festival attracted 716 guests, more than double the 350 who attended the inaugural event.

Using visitor-spending figures derived from a recent BACVB tourist survey, the average wedding party on Anna Maria Island contributes approximately \$50,000 to the Island economy. With an estimated 700 weddings a year, that’s \$35 million spent on the Island from weddings alone.

With those spending projections, planning for next year’s wedding festival has already begun.

## Retail

Hoteliers and accommodation owners are reporting few vacancies and the tourism boom appears to have affected the Island’s retail economy as well.

Signa Bouziane, co-owner of Mister Roberts Resortwear in Holmes Beach, said she’s never seen so many people in all the years the store has been open.

“February was the best February ever and, from what I’ve seen, March is also going to set a record. I’ve never seen so many people in the store. We’re getting our regulars who come every year, but we’ve made so many new friends. It’s wonderful,” she said.

And people are spending, although they’re a bit more budget conscious these days.

“They’re buying but looking to stretch their pocketbooks. They are looking for sales and discounts, but they are coming. And, from the traffic on the Island, I think this is the busiest season ever,” Bouziane said.

There is a lot of traffic at the Sterling Anvil jewelry store, but co-owner Mary Norman said not all of it translates into sales. Norman and co-owner Roxanne Davis moved the store to its Marina Drive location last summer after 37 years at their former location.

“The season is going well. We’re actually just a bit below last year, but we’re very happy with the move. I’m sure it will turn out to be positive,” Norman said.

One problem is that many Web sites still list Sterling Anvil at its old address.

“But our regular customers are finding us. With the economy down, I think people are just being a bit more cautious in their spending,” said Norman. “Still, it seems the hotels and restaurants are packed, and Publix is always crowded.”

The Manatee County Area Transit would agree that traffic on the Island is up when compared with last year.

MCAT director Ralf Hesseler said the passenger count on the Island trolley for January of 2009 was ahead of January 2008’s total.

Surprisingly, February ridership on the trolley was down a bit from the same month in 2008, he noted, but the March passenger count is up when compared with March 2008.

“We’ve been busy,” he said.

And the Island trolley should be even busier next week and Easter weekend.

Speciale said Easter generates the most traffic at Coquina Beach of any holiday. That’s why he’s already begun planning traffic and crowd control.

“We expect to be busy Easter. We just want everyone to enjoy themselves and be safe.”