Offseason discounts expected to keep Palm Beach County tourist attractions sizzling

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Summer offers a cool deal for vacationers headed to Palm Beach County, many of whom may be a county away or just around the corner.

It's the off season in the Palm Beaches. June, July and August are hot and quiet. Hotels are half-full and rates are sometimes half the prices of the peak winter months, but the beaches are packed and families frolic at water parks and area attractions. Thousands of people will take advantage of the luxury accommodations, beaches, golf and other attractions at a discount.

"We're anticipating a strong summer," said Manny O'Neill, president of the Palm Beach County Hotel & Lodging Association.

Reservations are ahead of last year's pace, which was an improvement over the previous recession- addled years, he said.

Last year, U.S. News & World Report ranked West Palm Beach as the 11th-best summer vacation destination, and it's listed as fourth-best for a golf vacation.

Last month, Coastal Living declared Jupiter one of America's happiest seaside towns.

Tourism officials say the county has an attractive portfolio from Jupiter to Boca Raton, regardless of the season.

Doug McLain, who coordinates the group sales staff for the Palm Beach County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said marketing resources should be concentrated on promoting the county during the summer, when the rooms are available. Floridians took 14.5 million leisure trips within the state last year, McLain said, and summer is when most of those Floridians check out the bounty of the Sunshine State.

That's largely a driving market. And if gas prices stay on the downturn, people may splurge on more weekend trips, said Peter Ricci, who directs the hospitality management program at Florida Atlantic University.

"Hotels all tell me they're doing better for the first few months (of the year) and reservations for summer look good," Ricci said.
Florida residents do plan to travel this summer, AAA Travel found in a recent survey. Sixty-five percent of the state’s residents plan to take a vacation of at least four days between May and September. About half will drive somewhere, the survey said, likely to a place nearby.

Not surprisingly, 36 percent of those travelers plan a beach getaway.

The Convention and Visitors Bureau is trying to tap into that with the MyPalmBeachSummer.com website, which launched Friday.

The local tourism marketing agency is teaming with Visit Florida and Google for the campaign, which focuses on affordable hotel packages, especially for families. People as near as Miami and Fort Lauderdale will hear radio ads and see online newspaper ads for Palm Beach County trips.

At the Boca Raton Resort & Club, about 60 percent of the summer customers come from Florida, said Carole Boucard, director of public relations and marketing. And leisure occupancy is expected to be up about 30 percent this summer, she said.

May and June are big wedding months, and the resort also woos locals and nearby Floridians with its Uniquely Boca Summer package.

Ann Margo Peart, public relations manager at The Breakers in Palm Beach, said summer bookings are up 15 percent from this time last year.

"We attribute this to having acquired a loyal summer following, particularly the drive-in Florida market, and the lure of The Breakers' magnificent beachfront and extensive family programs and activities," she said.

Many Europeans and South Americans visit during the summer months as well, Peart said. McLain said the Convention and Visitors Bureau is making a big push with Brazilian travel agents this month to capitalize on those travel trends.

Karen Cantor, public relations manager at PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens, said the resort is targeting "staycations" with discounts on select dates. Summer visitors often are focused on getting the best deals, and advance booking shows a good pace, she said.