Fourth of July travelers expected to stretch mid-week holiday

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West Palm Beach —

Fourth of July travel is expected to be up almost 5 percent for Florida, and, nationally, Independence Day trips will be at a peak for the decade, AAA projects.

More than 42.3 million Americans plan to journey 50 miles or more from home during the “holiday weekend.”

With the holiday on a Wednesday, the 4th itself obviously isn’t on a weekend, but AAA uses the term to describe the travel period from Tuesday, July 3, to Sunday, July 8.

The calendar will play a role because travelers have the option of including a weekend and two week days on either side of the holiday. When asked about their departure day, more than half of people surveyed plan to begin their trip before the start of the work week that includes July 4, AAA said.

“People obviously will have a decision to make,” Palm Beach County Tourist Development Council Executive Director Roger Amidon said Tuesday. “Take Friday through Wednesday and go back to work on Thursday, or work Monday and Tuesday and take Wednesday, Thursday and Friday off. Some people will take the whole week off.”

Declining gasoline prices will help drive the decision to hit the road. Florida motorists will pay an average of 30 cents less a gallon for gas than they did a year ago. In Palm Beach County, the average price for a gallon of regular gasoline Tuesday was $3.46.

Auto trips are expected to increase 4 percent over last year, accounting for 84 percent of travelers, AAA said.

Air travel is projected to increase by 9 percent, and such modes of transportation as cruise, tour, rail and bus that could be viewed as more budget-friendly will rise 10 percent, AAA said.
“Just because we are expecting a 5 percent increase overall does not mean people will not be frugal,” said AAA Auto Club South spokeswoman Jessica Brady.

Median holiday weekend spending is expected to be $749, a 7 percent decrease from 2011.

The longer holiday period, falling gas prices and a still-slow-but-recovering economy combined lead to the projected increase, Brady said.

The expected travel volume will tie the past decade’s high mark set in 2007 and represents close to a 42 percent increase from 2009, which had the fewest number of travelers, AAA said.

It could be that staycations are losing their luster.

“The pent-up desire to travel among Florida residents and, indeed, U.S. citizens, is quite high,” said Peter Ricci, director of the Hospitality Management Program at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

“The majority of this travel will be in-state with a lot of Palm Beach residents visiting South Beach and a lot of Miami-Dade residents visiting Palm Beach and Orlando and vice versa. Even someone who lives in Boca Raton taking a quick overnight to Fort Lauderdale Beach is likely,” Ricci said.

Ricci predicts a 3 percent increase in hotel occupancy in Palm Beach County over a year ago.

“It will definitely be a leisure travel week for our county,” Amidon said. He expects the occupancy rate for beachfront hotels to increase 5 percent to 7 percent over last year. Non-beachfront hotels might see an increase of 2 percent to 4 percent.

On the other hand, business travel will be reduced, with some of those hotels picking up family reunion or baseball team-related visitors.

“It will be a tough week for business travel hotels. They will capture one end of the week or the other,” Amidon said.

The Palm Beach County Convention and Visitors Bureau is promoting summer season hotel rates at mypalmbeachsummer.com.

“This is our huge push for the summer promotion. It highlights affordable luxury and family fun,” Amidon said.

AAA’s 4th of July travel projections:

1.8 million Floridians will drive, up 4.1 percent
162,667 will fly, up 9.9 percent

141,889 will take the bus, train or cruise, up 10 percent

Total travelers 2.1 million, up 4.9 percent