

Keys economic factors lead state

Airport records highest-ever passenger counts for March

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The Florida Keys led the state in lodging occupancy and the average daily room

rate in 2010 and for the past two months this year, according to data released Friday.

The occupancy rate in 2010 averaged 70.5 percent,

a 1.6 percent rise from the previous year. The average daily room rate was \$178, a 3.2 percent gain compared with 2009, according to Smith Travel Research, which tracks data for the hotel industry and provides analysis for lodging and destination management offices.

Miami was a close second in both occupancy, at 70.2 percent, and average daily room rate, at \$144, in 2010. Fort Lauderdale ranked third in occupancy, with 67.3 percent, and West Palm Beach's average daily room rate of \$125 was third.

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KEYS VS. FLORIDA

Lowest unemployment (March 2011)
6.6 vs. 11.1

Highest per-capita income (2009)
\$60,173 vs. \$38,965

Highest lodging occupancy (2010)
70.5 percent vs. 57.4 percent

Highest average room rates (2010)
\$178 vs. \$108

Lodging

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The Keys lodging picture continues to look bright during the first quarter of 2011, according to Smith. The Keys led in occupancy and room rate in Florida for February and March. In the latter month, occupancy was up 4.7 percent and the room rate was up 6.3 percent.

Other tourism statistics are on the rise as well.

Key West International Airport's passenger counts have continued to increase. Last month was the busiest March on record, with 36,046 passengers arriving and 35,593 departing, County Airports Director Peter Horton said.

In 2010, 566,889 passengers flew in and out of Key West, up 22.2 percent from the previous year's passenger count of 463,885, airport records show. Passenger counts peaked in 2005, with the airport serving 618,174 passengers. The number dropped to 563,947 in 2006 and 538,066 in 2007. The numbers continued to drop in 2008 to 453,000, but increased in 2009 to 463,885, according to airport records.

"We are doing as well as we possibly could during these challenging economic times," said Harold Wheeler, director of the Monroe County Tourist Development Council. "We're still the leader."

Key West Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Virginia Panico attributed the Keys' success to a number of activities that tourists can enjoy in the Keys, including diving, fishing and having an active nightlife.

"There's always something to do," Panico said. "There is not enough days in the week for people to do everything the Keys has to offer."

She also attributed some of the business to a reduction in hotel prices.

"It's a lot more economically feasible for a lot of folks," she said.



The Keys offer two aspects of travel that appeal to tourists — eco-tourism and relaxation, said Jodi Weinhofer, president of the Lodging Association of the Florida Keys and Key West. The Monroe County Tourist Development Council has also done a good job creating advertising "that catches people's eyes," she said.

"We have a lot going for us," Weinhofer said. The hotel and airport numbers are only a portion of a more economically stable outlook for Monroe County. State officials released federal figures last week that showed Monroe County went from the No. 2 spot to No. 1 in Florida for per-capita personal income, with the typical resident earning \$60,173 in 2009.

Also, unemployment figures show the Keys have the lowest unemployment rate in the state, at 6.6 percent, according to March statistics released by the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

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