

EMMA RITCH TOURISM TALK

Strand gets top interest on Yahoo, AOL sites

The Grand Strand rivaled Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears for popularity on the Internet last week.

The term "Myrtle Beach" popped up as the top hit on Yahoo's search engine, and AOL reported Tuesday that the area is the most-searched beach in the U.S. on its site.

Both honors are new to Myrtle Beach, and popularity on search engines is one way local tourism officials can measure how effective their advertising is, said Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean.

"The surge of interest in the Yahoo and AOL surveys is an indication of rising interest in the destination and what it offers as far as vacations, relocation or real estate," Dean said.

Also last week, a national traveler survey by D.K. Shifflet & Associates ranked the area as the second-most-popular family summer destination, trailing Orlando, Fla. The designation is based on four years of data and includes only discretionary leisure travel - excluding work travel, visiting relatives or attending special events such as weddings, according to spokesman Jim Caldwell.

All the attention could prompt more visitors to consider Myrtle Beach, Dean said. But the more notable conclusion one can make is that the area's extra marketing dollars are reaching new potential visitors, he said.

The chamber, the lodging cooperative and Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday raised \$5 million and received a \$2.5 million state grant for marketing to out-of-state visitors last year. This year, the group wants to raise \$16 million and qualify for grants of \$8 million.

The Hard Rock Park and The Market Common, both slated to open in spring 2007, could also be generating extra interest, Dean said.

Golf Holiday President Mickey McCamish said the only explanation for Myrtle Beach's spate of Web notoriety is the extra money being spent.

"You can see it in several ways: AOL and Yahoo," McCamish said. "It proves those dollars are at work."

But Dean warned that hoteliers and restaurateurs shouldn't necessarily think a bigger Web presence will mean more visitors.

"Unfortunately there is no direct correlation between interest, awareness and actual vacation bookings," he said. "But increased interest is a good thing."

Air passengers increase Tourism got more good news this week, with Myrtle Beach International Airport reporting 13.3 percent growth in the number of passengers in July compared to the same month in 2006.

It's the 11th consecutive positive year-over-year monthly growth at the airport, according to data from Horry County spokeswoman Lisa Bourcier. The airport handled 183,443 passengers in July.

The airport also has the highest number of year-to-date passengers ever, the data shows - 485,548 enplanements.

McCamish said the airport traffic is rebounding from lows in 2006. He attributed much of the traffic to Spirit Air, with 36 percent of the total passenger deplanements, and Myrtle Beach Direct, which has more than doubled its monthly passenger deplanements since starting service in March.

"The airport benefits from all the passengers that fly in and fly out," he said.

The number of passengers increases the area's annual take from the federal Airport Improvement Entitlement Grant, which is now about \$3.6 million, he said.

That money can be used for airport improvements that would otherwise be funded by tax dollars, he said.

Dean linked the airport's increases to the same marketing dollars that increased Myrtle Beach's Web popularity.

"It's 10 months of consistent growth that clearly correlated with 10 months of increased advertisement," he said.