

## **Bad economy a party pooper for many Beach spring breakers**

### **PHOTOS/POLL**

By TAUREN DYSON

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FORT MYERS BEACH — It's a little after 5 p.m. and Nick Moore is ordering another round of beers. He's at the Hooters at Fort Myers Beach and this is his reward for enduring the brutal St. Cloud, Minn., winter.

For the fourth year straight, he's made it down to the popular spring break spot and he says it gets better every year.

"I'd say this year is the most crazy," says Moore, 21. "It's good times for days."

He says the crowd is bigger than ever and he's spending more money than years past. And he doesn't care.

"My parents are paying for it," says Moore, 21, a senior at St. Cloud University in Minnesota.

Others aren't so lucky. The financial burden of partying has taken its toll on some partiers. Soaring gas prices and a sluggish economy have forced many to cut their trip short. Others have taken drastic measures to ensure that they can participate in spring break.

“I had to take out an extra student loan ... 1,000 bucks,” says Brady Van Winkle, 19, a sophomore at the University of Toledo (Ohio). “All my best friends from school were going, so I figured I had to go.”

The loan he’s using to cover his spring break expenses, plus a stringent budget, has helped get him in financial shape for his trip. But soaring gas prices, hotel room rates, and expensive drinks have taken a huge chunk of his budget.

The reaction from people — merchants and visitors — at spring break is mixed. The economy, some feel, has little effect on turnout. Others say it’s the main reason the spring break crowd seemed thinned out from years past.

Griff Thurston has owned a chair and umbrella rental shop, and a kiosk selling sunglasses, since 2006. He admits he’s had better years working on the beach.

“Chairs and umbrellas are more of a luxury,” Thurston says of the rentals ranging from \$15 to \$50 a day. “People seem to carry their own chairs more often.”

At Kilwin’s ice cream shop, business is dragging. Gwendell Frisk has noticed the drop-off in customers from two years ago. He says while business has been steady, the shop is bringing in \$4,000 a day — 15 percent less than two years ago.

“People just aren’t spending money,” Frisk says of the spring break crowd.

Jeff Malbon, part owner of the Best Western Plus beach resort, says occupancy at his hotel is high. But he concedes the economy has affected his business somewhat.

“We have a slightly lower rate, overall. It’s two or three dollars less compared to last year,” Malbon explains. He says his hotel rents to patrons ages 23 and up. Consequently, his resort caters to families, with older adults who tend to have more disposable income.

“We’ve been 95 to 100 percent occupied starting the second week of February, and we’re 96 percent booked for the month of March,” Malbon says.

High occupancy rates are a strong indicator of how well business is going overall. But they don’t tell the whole story.

“We have a slightly lower rate, overall. It’s two or three dollars less compared to last year,” Malbon explains, adding that his hotel rents to patrons ages 23 and up. Consequently, his resort caters to families, with older adults who tend to have more disposable income. In other words, no rowdy party scene.

“Lani Kai is where spring breakers can go and be as loud as they want,” Malbon says.

Lani Kai is ground zero at Fort Myers Beach spring break. It’s a hotel that visitors never have to leave if they want action.

“It’s a stay-and-play destination. You never have to leave the property,” says Caroline Epperson, Lani Kai’s events and wedding coordinator. “We are booked solid for the month of March.”

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Estero Boulevard — or the strip as some call it — runs in front of the Lani Kai.

The strip is log-jammed with cars. Heading in from Bonita Beach, a procession is backed up for more than a mile. With younger and

older customers streaming in and out of the bars and restaurants, it gives the impression of a busy spring break.

Longtime residents say they know better. Some say this year, so far, there is a huge drop-off from recent years. And they think the beaches' bad reputation may be to blame.

"I think the Lee County sheriff's department hurts the tourism for spring break," says Wayne Gates, a taxi driver who is parked across the strip from Lani Kai. "The word is come down on vacation, leave on probation."

Fewer people at spring break, he says, has taken a huge hit on his business. He thinks that overly aggressive law enforcement is to blame for scaring away repeat customers to spring break.

Gates has lived in the area for 15 years and has seen many disturbing scenes on the strip.

"When I see them handcuffing a girl in a bikini for open container (violation) and throwing her in a paddy wagon that a guy's peed-in because they wouldn't let him out, they don't come back after that," says Gates, 54. "There's definitely less people than it has been in previous years."

This experience could scare away someone under 21. That's why many college kids flock to Cancun for spring break.

The Sheriff's Office is responsible for policing the spring break area at Fort Myers Beach. The department keeps statistics for 31 categories, including underage drinking, open container, DUI, narcotics, trespass, thefts, and batteries. In 2000, there were 226 arrests in those categories. In 2009 there were 121.

The decline in arrests could mean party-goers have changed their attitudes and are acting more responsibly. Or maybe not. Maybe revelers are negatively swayed by what they think are overly vigilant deputies. Or maybe the economy has adversely affected what they do.

Not all in the service industry think having a heavy law enforcement presence is bad.

“Every year down here, somebody dies down here from being stupid ... someone gets drunk and drives up the street into a tree,” says Mike Dewind, a taxi driver and 18-year Fort Myers Beach resident. “Their (the police) job is to try to save everybody, and I think they’re doing a good job.”

Dewind, 59, says going to Cancun isn’t a good option, either. The violence in Mexico has deterred many students from trekking below the border, he says.

Since 2006, Mexico has experienced more than 28,000 murders. In 2010, eight people were killed in Cancun after a group of men threw Molotov cocktails into a bar.

“An open-container violation is a lot better than getting shot in the head,” Dewind says of the types of crimes occurring in Southwest Florida vs. elsewhere.

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Many people get creative, like Lee Tompson. He got lucky. A friend’s parents have a home nearby. So he and four college buddies from St. Cloud University flew down from Minnesota. He says having a place to stay made the impossible, possible.

“I probably wouldn’t be able to afford it,” says Tompson, 21.

Working a construction job during summers has allowed him to scrape up enough cash to enjoy spring break in Florida. But he paid \$400 for his plane ticket. And unlike other young people at the beach, his parents didn’t donate any money. So spending lavishly isn’t in his budget.

“Spring break is a good time but it’s something you can count out if you can’t afford it,” Tompson says.

