Florida's Tourism Industry

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Florida, The Sunshine State, is a slogan designed to attract tourists. The nickname was officially adopted by the state legislature in 1970, although it had already appeared on license plates since the 1950s. Florida brings to mind sunny skies, sandy beaches, and warm waters. It is the place for fun in the sun, whether you are looking for boating, fishing, swimming, or simply sunbathing. Florida is home to some of the country's most entertaining and enjoyable theme parks: Walt Disney World, Sea World, Universal, and Busch Gardens. And the state hosts many events that visitors come to watch such as Super Bowls (15 to date), college football bowl games (six games are scheduled for the 2013-14 postseason), spring training baseball, shuttle launches and other space-related missions, and the Daytona 500. Add in a few cruise ports, some tourists from Central and South America who visit for a day or two of shopping along Florida's Gold Coast, and a competitive convention business. The result is a tourism industry that is arguably the most salient and successful among the 50 states, and the most important sector of Florida's economy.

Florida first started receiving visitors with the arrival of Ponce de Leon's convoy of explorers in 1513, an event the state is currently commemorating with its Viva Florida 500 celebration. Significant numbers of tourists began to arrive during the latter half of the 19th century. However, Florida's tourism history is most commonly defined by the opening of Walt Disney World on October 1, 1971. All other events are categorized as pre or post Disney. In the decades prior to the opening of Walt Disney World, Florida attracted automobile visitors with a number of roadside attractions that promoted the State's natural environment and wildlife. The map below illustrates the location of many of these attractions, as well as the major US highways that visitors used to travel throughout the state. Places like Cypress Gardens, Silver Springs, and Weeki Wachee Springs (see photo) promoted the lush tropical vegetation and aquatic formations that could be found in Florida. Attractions such as Marineland and Parrot Jungle exhibited the fish, mammals, reptiles and birds that inhabited the state. In a sense, these places were the precursors to contemporary ecotourism.

A map of Florida's Pre-Disney Roadside Attractions created for the AAG Newsletter by John McEwen, Louisiana State University
Weeki Wachee Springs, located approximately 50 miles north of downtown Tampa, continues to provide Florida-style fun for its visitors

The post Disney era is characterized by large theme parks and large numbers of visitors who converge on the state by highway and by air. In a recent interview on NPR (2013), Oscar Collins, a glass bottom boat captain at Silver Springs characterized the park's heyday during the 1960s by stating "we were doing 4-and 5000 people in the middle of the week, and on weekends, 6- and 7000." In 2010, Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom welcomed nearly 17 million visitors, an average of over 46,000 persons per day. Walt Disney World's other three theme parks (EPCOT, Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom) welcomed approximately 10 million additional visitors each. Universal's two Orlando
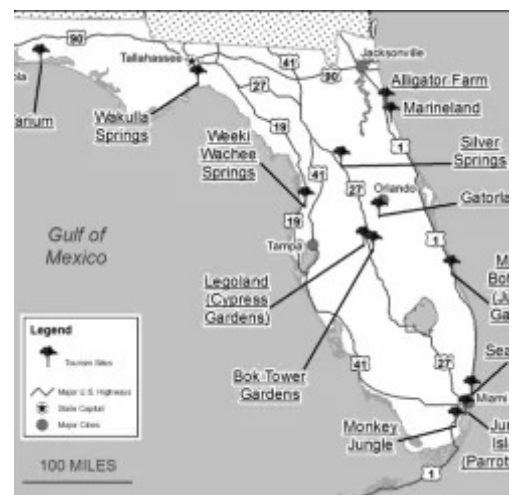
theme parks received approximately 6 million guests each, and Busch Gardens in Tampa welcomed more than 4 million visitors (Inside the Magic 2011).

Numbers like these should allow Florida to pursue some lofty tourism goals. Specifically, the state wishes to become the No. 1 travel destination in the world. This is the vision of Visit Florida, a not-for-profit corporation created by the state legislature in 1996, which serves as the state's official tourism marketing agency (www.visitflorida.com). 2012 was a record year for tourism in Florida. The state welcomed over 91 million visitors who spent over $71 billion, generating 23 percent of the state's sales tax revenue (Visit Florida 2013). There were also over 20 million in-state visits and staycations. This continues a trend of steady growth in the number of tourists from year to year over the past 10 years. Only the financial crisis of 2008-2009 created a temporary drop in the number of visitors to Florida since 2002. And Visit Florida is taking steps to build on the current success. Beginning in the summer of 2013, video teams trained by Google Maps experts began to use Google's Street View Trekker technology to capture images of the state's 825 miles of beaches. Florida's Governor Rick Scott said "this technology from Google will allow anyone in the world to see how vast and beautiful Florida's beaches are, which will create more opportunities for tourism." The organization is also using social media, expert bloggers with journalism backgrounds, as well as traditional TV, radio, cinema, and print advertising to promote the state for tourism.

And while Visit Florida promotes tourism outside the state, the Partnership for Florida's Tourism (www.floridastourismcounts.org), a grassroots coalition designed to increase public funding of tourism marketing, promotes the industry inside the state. Their lobbying focuses on the importance of visitors in creating jobs for Floridians. Their research shows that over 1 million Floridians are employed in the tourism industry, and that one new job is created by every 85 additional visitors. Comprised of associations representing restaurants and lodging, attractions, RV and campgrounds, and destination marketing organizations, the Partnership for Florida's Tourism argues that Florida must combat the increased funding for tourism promotion spent by other states and destinations.

However, there is plenty of combat within the state as well. Over the past several years, investors in South Florida have lobbied the legislature to allow billion dollar resort casinos to be developed in Dade and Broward Counties. These efforts have been met by strong opposition from the Walt Disney Company and the Florida Chamber of Commerce which support the family-friendly image of Central Florida's theme parks. They are also concerned that these resort casinos would create the hotel and meeting room space necessary for South Florida to significantly impinge on Central Florida's convention business.

There are many other examples of serious competition for visitors within the state. The website for Florida Suncoast Tourism Promotions (www.floridatourism.com) contains a regional travel guide that states "South Florida has seen the best days go by as Orlando and other parts of the state beckon tourists . . . Although Fort Lauderdale is no longer a spring break haven, and Miami has seen its share of urban troubles, the beaches, the people, the Everglades, and the experience of it all is not to be missed."

In addition, some of Florida's traditional vernacular regions have Balkanized as adjacent areas compete for tourism income and tax revenue. Two of the most recent examples would be the emergence of the Historic Coast in St. Augustine and St. Johns County, formerly part of the First Coast, and the Cultural Coast south of Tampa Bay focusing on Sarasota, formerly part of the Sun Coast. Moreover, the Visit Florida website presents literally hundreds of vacation options, each one hoping to outshine the other and attract potential visitors.

Obstacles to success in the tourism industry are not restricted to competition among Florida localities. Events beyond the control of the tourism industry may impede Florida's desire to be the world's number one travel

destination. Devastating hurricanes are always a possibility during the summer and fall months. Human caused disasters such as the Deep Water Horizon oil spill in 2010 threatened the pristine character of Florida's beaches. And Florida's controversial stand- your-ground law, the focus of intense media attention during the spring and summer of 2013, has many groups calling for a boycott of Florida tourism until the law is overturned.

Despite these obstacles, the state recorded a record number of tourists for the first quarter of 2013. Florida has come a long way since the nature based tourism of the early 20th century, and the state is banking on tourism to remain a major job and revenue creator in the state's 21st century economy. ♦

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