Florida tourism will bounce back from Hurricane Irma

Sean Lengell
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The Economy

Hurricane Irma punched Florida hard, but she failed to deliver a knockout blow to the state’s top industry — tourism.

The Sunshine State’s most popular tourist destinations, including Orlando-area theme parks and coastal beaches, are fine, as are most hotels and resorts. The mega storm hit during one of Florida’s slowest tourism periods, buying precious time to rebuild ahead of the busy winter season.

The storm’s center veered away from the heavily populated Miami-Fort Lauderdale and Tampa Bay areas, limiting damages. The cruise ship industry also was spared when Irma shifted away from the state’s busy eastern coastal cruise ports.

“On a macro level, tourism is fairly resilient, and the state is already starting to see normalcy again,” said Dr. Lori Pennington-Gray, director of the Tourism Crisis Management Initiative at the University of Florida. “There are obviously these pockets that were harder hit and are still in recovery mode and may be in recovery for a longer period of time. But other portions of the state are already starting to see the tourists come back, with businesses open for business as usual.”

Another reason Florida tourism is poised for a quick recovery is the strong economy — always the industry’s biggest driver.
Tourists also are less leery to visit areas harmed by Mother Nature than those scarred by terrorism. Even last year’s Zika virus threat, which initially scared off some would-be Florida visitors, had no lasting impact, as the state hit record tourist numbers during the first half of this year.

“The demand for tourism is very elastic. It depends on two main things: one is price, and the other is security concerns,” said Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu, director of the M3 Center for Hospitality Technology and Innovation at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. “Terrorist activities are much more difficult (for tourist destinations) because it takes much more time to recuperate. Natural disasters are much easier” to overcome.

And ironically, Irma could boost Florida’s tourism as she pummeled the Caribbean, one of the state’s chief rivals for tourists. And Hurricane Maria just piled onto Irma’s destruction of Puerto Rico, keeping that U.S. territory out of the running.

But smaller businesses such as independent restaurant, bars, and bed and breakfasts will take longer than large resorts and chains to return to full capacity. Some under-insured local joints may never reopen.

And it will be a while before the Florida Keys, where Irma wreaked some of her worst havoc, are back to normal. Extensive storm surge damaged properties fronting the Atlantic Ocean, though those on the Gulf of Mexico side of the islands fared better. Most hotels and motels on the island chain are closed. Those open are housing mostly recovery personnel, such as utility workers and repair crews, as well as residents evacuated from uninhabitable homes.

On the bright side, the road and bridges that connect the Keys to the Florida peninsula have been declared safe for traffic. That will speed up recovery. Key West International Airport — which offers the chain’s only regular commercial air service — is partially functioning. And most island residents only lost power for a few days.

Officials in Key West hope the island is fully operational by Oct. 20, the first day of its annual Fantasy Fest carnival. The rest of the Keys are poised to be ready in time for the winter tourist season. Both targets will be met.

Fla-Keys.com has the latest updates on what’s open in the Keys.
The Sunshine State is adept at the hurricane-recovery drill, which it must run often. One of its biggest tests was in 2004, when four successive hurricanes made contact. It always rebounds quickly. Irma will be no exception.

“When it starts snowing in the North, people are going to forget all about Hurricane Irma, or any of the hurricanes, as they have done in the past,” Cobanoglu said. “And they will come to Florida.”