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The tourists will come

A slow spring is likely to be followed by a robust summer, according to tourist businesses in the San Juan Islands



Crow Valley Pottery owners Michael Rivkin and Jeffri Coleman are optimistic about the upcoming tourist season.

By Amanda Baltazar

Thoughts of a vacation are far away from most people's minds as they grapple with wondering if they'll have a job in a month's time.

While Hawaii, the Caribbean and Europe may be out of the picture, a vacation closer to home may be deemed a small treat – almost a necessity to escape from lives that aren't too rosy right now.

For anyone living between Portland, Ore., and Vancouver, B.C., the San Juan Islands can provide that escape – at minimal cost and hassle since there are no



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flights involved.

And while so far this year, tourism hasn't been great, it typically never is during winter months, but what worries some is that the spring months aren't showing a lot of promise.

Come summer, however, things turn around again. According to Laura Saccio, who owns Earthbox Motel and Bird Rock Hotel in Friday Harbor, San Juan Island, with her husband Adam, it's because people can't take a risk on the weather this year.

"People are serious about their summer plans," she said. "It didn't matter as much before because people didn't care as much about what they were spending, and knew that if the weather wasn't good, they'd have another vacation."

But now, with vacation most likely limited to one per year, summer is the time visitors are banking on.

Real deals

In fact, bookings at Earthbox are up 97 percent for August and up 10 percent for July, said Saccio, which compares very favorably to March through June, when bookings are down anywhere from 20 percent to 40 percent. It's a similar picture at Bird Rock Hotel, where booked rooms are up by 128 percent in August, but down 40 percent to 50 percent in June.

To draw more tourists during the off-season, the San Juan Islands Visitors' Bureau has encouraged many island businesses to offer specials, and these seem to be having a positive effect.

One such program is the Ferry For Free initiative, through which participating accommodations will deduct the price of the ferry fare from their guests' room rates. Lodging on both San Juan Island and Orcas are participating.

The visitors' bureau is also running the tag line "Real Islands. Real Close. Real Deals." Under this program it lists all members' special deals on its Website to encourage visitors to come now to save money.

Most hotels, motels and B&Bs are offering deals or value-added packages to make it more attractive to visit the islands in the off-season or during the week. Earthbox and Bird Rock Hotel both offered \$100 weeknight stays through the end of April, in recognition of 100th anniversary of Friday Harbor. These room rates will increase to \$150 at Earthbox from May 1 to mid-June.

The motel also offered its 20/20 deal – 20 percent off the first 20 rooms that are booked every day, which was scheduled to run through the end of April. Bird Rock Hotel offers 20 percent off deluxe rooms.

Perhaps the best deal on the islands is at the Haro Hotel at Roche Harbor Resort, San Juan Island. During the month of March the hotel offered a \$49 flat rate on any accommodation during the week, including its newly developed, top-dollar suites. The prices rose to \$99 in April, \$149 in May and will be back to the standard cost of \$349 to \$449 for the summer months.

"We've seen a huge response," said Sam Jacobson, lodging director. "In March and April we typically book a 4:1 ratio for the weekends compared to the week, but that has flipped thanks to this special offer."

The hotel is also offering affordable packages to give extra value to customers. These included \$399 in March for two nights in a luxury suite and a spa treatment for one person, or dinner for two in the nearby McMillin's Restaurant. The price for this package jumps by \$100 each month through June, but will be discontinued for the summer months.

And in a final value offering, the hotel is providing either a free spa treatment, a kayak trip, a whale-watching tour or dinner for two for anyone who stays three nights or more. "We've had people call in and ask if this is for real," Jacobson pointed out.

Visitors taking advantage of these specials typically come from Seattle. "We found they wouldn't come up on the weekdays before, but then we found out they wouldn't come up at the prices we were offering," he said.

"It's not that we think we're too expensive; it's that we're responding to the



Roche Harbor is offering deals and specials in response to the economy, and in the hope of drawing future loyal guests.

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economy and hopefully we'll keep these visitors as loyal guests in the future."

The specials haven't been heavily advertised. They're simply listed on the hotel's Web site under Packages & Specials and on the San Juan Island Visitors' Bureau site (www.visitsanjuan.com).

"But we'll continue to find some way to have people come up and experience the San Juan Islands through Roche Harbor, so we'll do more offers in the fall, probably similar to these," Jacobson said.

Accommodations on Orcas Island are also offering discounts for more value.

For the real deal, look no further than Bayside Cottages in Olga on Orcas Island. Here, owner Jim Nelson offered the third night's stay for just \$1 through the end of April, which not surprisingly, he said, garnered "some nice response." This program might extend into May "if things need to be jump-started some more," and will restart again in October, once the tourist crowds thin out.

Nelson feels the island has turned a corner recently, and is feeling more upbeat about both the economy and the upcoming tourist season.

"In the past couple of weeks it's picked up dramatically again and that's through the spring and the summer," he said.

"We are seeing people book shorter stays spread out through the year, but coming two to three times a year instead of once." And these people are all from fairly nearby, he said. "People aren't particularly inclined to jump on an airplane and incur all those costs."

Carl Silvernail, owner of Otters Pond B&B has a winter pricing break, offering 10 percent to 15 percent off rooms through the end of May, and is adding some packages. So far there's the spa package in conjunction with Orcas Spa & Athletics, and he's negotiating with several restaurants to provide lodging-and-dinner deals with him.

Noshes for nominal prices

It's not just lodgings that are offering special deals. Anna Maria de Freitas, owner of Coho restaurant in Friday Harbor, has opened up her entire menu to its "three for \$30" dinner deal (in the summer it will be three for \$35 at the 5 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. sittings) Any three dishes can be picked although one or two – such as the 10-oz. steak and the crab cakes – incur a small additional charge.

She's also offering a good variety of wines at \$20 per bottle. "We are just looking to serve really good value wines," she said. "These are difficult times for all of us, so we're being creative."

She's not worried about the tourist season. "There's already as sense of momentum for the season and we're all working together as a community," she explained. "There's still a sense of optimism and business as usual. We're opening our arms to the tourists who are coming this summer."

However, she said she does see people making different decisions while on vacation. They might eat out once instead of every night, and cook in their accommodation other nights.

"But they are making the choice to come here and making the choice to stay overnight, which are really important decisions," she pointed out.

Duck Soup Inn, four miles north of Friday Harbor, is offering 10 percent off to customers who stay at either the local Best Western or the Juniper Lane Guest House.

"The idea was to get more people in while it's quiet, up until the end of June," said owner and executive chef Gretchen Allison, who expects to offer something similar again in the fall.

Once she was up and running again for the season in early April, she planned to do specials with other accommodations, too.

Allison is quietly hopeful for the coming summer season.

"I'm assuming it's going to be slower. There's a certain amount of overhead – things you really can't cut out – but we're hoping to go ahead and hope things are OK."

In response to the difficult economic times, she has dropped her prices on a couple

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of appetizers in the hopes of making people more comfortable and to draw them in. “If they are not sitting in the chairs, then that’s not good,” she said.

Retail ready to rally

Other retail outlets are also getting creative. Michael Rivkin and Jeffri Coleman are stocking more affordable items in Crow Valley Pottery in Eastsound on Orcas Island.

“Metaphorically, it’s a year for cotton, rather than silk,” said Rivkin. “Whereas in previous years people may have bought a \$100 bowl; last year they maybe bought two \$50 bowls and this year they’ll maybe buy three \$25 bowls.”

And while he expects the tourist season to be down slightly, he’s not too worried. “The fact that we’re close to Seattle, Portland and Vancouver, combined with lower fuel costs and combined with pent up demand (people have to get out), all mean we could have a good year,” he explained.

Crow Valley will also continue to offer free shipping on big-ticket items, as well as having Rivkin and Coleman personally deliver many pieces as they travel to and from Seattle. “These are our single greatest tools because people want value this year,” Rivkin explained.

The story is a similar one at The Toy Box in Friday Harbor.

“Compared to last year, business is a lot slower,” said owner Nancy Hanson. “We really survive on our local business but we do get a nice boost in the summer. But people will always buy toys for their kids and there will always be birthday parties.”

To boost business, Hanson advertises in the local visitors’ guide and in a local map that all the tourists carry. She finds this much more effective than newspaper or magazine advertisements.

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