

Tuesday, October 18, 2005

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Despite Gas Prices, Travel is Expected to Be High for Holiday Weekend

5/27/2005

May 27--Scott Keefer is planning a big Memorial Day weekend in Chattanooga with a few of his buddies.

"I heard about the new Riverwalk up there, and we might try to go to a (Chattanooga Lookouts) ball game," the Birmingham, Ala., resident said.

The facts that the Tennessee Riverwalk is free and Lookouts tickets relatively inexpensive are good for Mr. Keefer, who could wind up paying more than \$500 for gas just to get to Chattanooga and back -- in his boat.

"I'll probably burn a couple of hundred gallons on the round trip" from Lake Guntersville, Ala., he said. "It gives you pause because it's so expensive, but it's something I like to do.

"I know people who normally make a (boat) trip to Chattanooga who aren't going because of gas, but this is a vacation for me and my friends. This is how my recreational dollars are spent," he said.

Gregg Laskoski, a Tampa, Fla.-based spokesman for AAA Auto Club South, said Mr. Keefer is in the mainstream when it comes to holiday weekend travel in a time of \$2-per-gallon gasoline.

"Last year, when gas went to \$2 nationwide, people were wringing their hands and wondering what that would mean for travel," he said. "It didn't mean a thing -- we saw tremendous numbers of people traveling well into the Christmas season.

"Even with gas where it is, people will be traveling in record numbers," Mr. Laskoski said.

AAA predicts that 37.2 million Americans, 2.2 percent more than last year, will travel at least 50 miles from home on this long holiday weekend. Some 900,000 Georgians will hit the road, according to AAA, as will about 600,000 Tennesseans.

The key, Mr. Laskoski said, is that while many people complain about gas prices, they won't let those prices stop them from enjoying their leisure time and travel.

"Gas price is a very minor component of a family's vacation budget, maybe 4 or 5 percent," he said.

"Even in the demographic where the budget is really tight, (a family) might stay with friends instead of in a hotel or cut down on eating out -- but they're going to make that trip," he said.

Area hoteliers said advance bookings indicate a great many people will be making trips to Chattanooga. Annie Still of the Choo-Choo Holiday Inn said the inn is sold out Saturday night and has only a few rooms available Friday night.

"It's a typical, busy Memorial Day weekend," she said, "about the same as last year."

Bill Mish, director of operations for Vision Hospitality Group, said that company's several Chattanooga-area hotels are almost completely booked for the weekend.

"This is a trend that's never changed," he said. "Memorial Day weekend is always busiest Friday and Saturday, then there's a dropoff. People usually go home Sunday to catch up and rest before going back to work on Tuesday."

Mr. Laskoski said one interesting difference in this year's AAA projections is that while the number of drivers is about the same as last year, the number of Americans likely to fly is up by 4 percent.

"That suggests to me that people are traveling longer distances," he said.

Christina Siebold, manager of community relations for the Chattanooga Metropolitan Airport, said 7 of 10 passengers flying into the city do so on business, but indications there are that a busier-than-usual holiday weekend is on its way.

"Based on our first quarter, when our passenger traffic was up 12 percent, our sense is that we'll be up as well on this holiday weekend," she said.

Ms. Siebold said if holiday traffic does increase at the airport, it will be due to lower fares and increased numbers of flights into Chattanooga.

"Fare reductions across the board benefit mostly the business traveler, but the leisure traveler also benefits," she said.

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