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With inflation at a 41-year high, what will tourism look like this year?

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The Providence Journal

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Photo by Jim Rogers, Shutterstock. A couple at Narragansett, on Rhode Island's south shore, enjoys the sunshine and a beach day.

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Will inflation impact tourism in Rhode Island this summer?

Tourism officials are optimistic about tourism across the state, partially as a result of pent-up demand following the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021.

Experts say 2022 is likely to be a banner year for tourism, even as gas prices have nearly doubled. Meanwhile we hold $4 million in hotels and historic tourism are quickly heating up in advance of the summer season.

Gas prices are just part of the inflation equation that will likely change travel patterns this summer, or age-here seen a 42% increase in price, part of the 41% inflation rate, the highest in 40 years, according to the federal Consumer Price Index, leftover by 8.5% in April.

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Inflation will have a more significant effect on both sides of the supply and demand equation. It could push a one-time punch for restaurants as cost-sensitive patrons reduce how much they go out and while the rising prices in food will eat into restaurantsrsr' margins.

Officials expect tourism to rebound in 2022

Tourism officials are optimistic about tourism across the state, partially as a result of pent-up demand following the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021.

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"It's going to be a very strong year, and the reality is we've had many strong years," said South County Tourism Council President Lauren Bishop. "Continued growth is what we're looking for this year."

Thinking about a road trip? Hit the road, without needing a tickets, as gas prices continue to climb to record highs.

Gas prices are all the attention, since they are plastered on signs across the state, but they make little difference to most of the people who are in the South County area, which is a destination for people from all through New England and into New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia is a "big market" for southern Rhode Island, as is Washington, D.C., both less than a day's drive away, Bishop said.

Photo: Narragansett Town pier, Narragansett, Rhode Island's southern coastline. Journal

South County, measured by the tax income generated by hotels and motels, has been growing since 2015. One trend Bishop has seen, which started during the pandemic and has continued, is longer stays, from two nights to three and four.

Booking sites are up early in the season, which means people plan to drive to the southern half of the state. Bishop said.

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Narragansett Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kip Foulette said hotels and other lodging are filling up and the visitor center, which she runs, is getting a high volume of questions about what to do in town. High gas prices might shrink the distance people are willing to drive, making Narragansett a more desirable vacation destination.

Looking ahead, people booking' in 2023: New Yorkshirts ship trips, calling "Lonesome Dove"

On Block Island, the pre-bookings for hotels are "through the roof," Block Island Tourism Council Executive Director Jenna Will said.

Will said the island is poised to capture a big portion of the market of people who would normally take overseas vacations but are hesitant over safety concerns as the pandemic continues.

"They can still get island vacation, and being that we're in that drive market, we're accessible to millions and millions of people," Will said.

Photo: Narragansett Town pier, Narragansett, Rhode Island's southern coastline. Journal

Photo by Jim Rogers, Shutterstock. Block Island, accessible by ferry and close to drive for day trips, is a popular destination for Rhode Island.

Jamestown Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jane Goldstein said the Jamestown Visitor Center, which she runs, is also seeing a high volume of calls and drive tourists from within Block Island as people look for open closer to home for a day trip.

"Every year, tourism has been increasing and I think this year, we'll see that even more," she said.

What will inflation mean for restaurants?

Kevin Gaudreau, owner of Hi Kitchen on Hope Street in Providence, is turning what was Bangkoks in Jamestown into a new restaurant called Rock, which should be open by June 17.

In 2019, restaurants were doing "gangbusters," Gaudreau said. Then the pandemic came, along with government aid. By 2021, business was very good, he said, and 2022 could be the most high-water mark for the industry.

Photo: Gaudreau, owner of Hi Kitchen on Hope Street in Providence, is working what was Bangkoks in Jamestown into a new restaurant called Rock. Journal

Kevin Gaudreau, owner of Hi Kitchen on Hope Street in Providence, is working what was Bangkoks in Jamestown into a new restaurant called Rock. Journal

But restaurants are getting squeezed by their supply chain as material prices increase, he said, and inflation is causing a shortage of workers. Rock will have 70 seats and half, and other items like wine cost 40%, according to the Consumer Price Index.

"I understand I can't sustain for raising prices, because then I'd price myself out of the market," Gaudreau said.

Searching inflation elsewhere in April: Will price wears shoppers at a bit of relief?

Gaudreau's restaurants rely largely on dishes made from scratch, including pasta and sauces. Only Blue Goat uses fish to keep prices down.

Rock will have a "very limited" menu, he said, with no sandwiches. With the increased price of beef, Gaudreau will likely buy fewer of the more expensive cuts, and move them to daily specials from the menu.

"It's more about menu engineering and trying to create the most value," he said.

Photo: Gaudreau, owner of Hi Kitchen on Hope Street in Providence, is working what was Bangkoks in Jamestown into a new restaurant called Rock. Journal

Photo by Jim Rogers, Shutterstock. Block Island, accessible by ferry and close to drive for day trips, is a popular destination for Rhode Island.

Moves are getting smaller as restaurants are pulling more expensive ingredients to keep prices down, and inflation because the wished-supplies just aren't coming in, Gaudreau said. Restaurants are also having difficulty hiring.

Inflation and construction: Providence's owner-inflation cost rises to $90 million due to growth chain issues, Inflation

One operator Fountain knows didn't get tenant-ready in an earlier from a supplier, and had to change his menu for food and drinks accordingly.

"There are so many decisions that go into what a menu looks like," she said.

North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kristin Urbach said she expects tourism will cut back on how often they eat and opt for less expensive experiences.

Prepare: more: Electricity will be much more expensive in M and winter

Holly Brooks said she has been experiencing the rise in costs while visiting Narragansett and Block Island, where she lives in Rhode Island. Her family's island vacation, they've noticed restaurants are more expensive than they expected, with smaller portion sizes. But it's the little things that are catching them.

Photo: Gaudreau, owner of Hi Kitchen on Hope Street in Providence, is working what was Bangkoks in Jamestown into a new restaurant called Rock. Journal

Photo by Jim Rogers, Shutterstock. Block Island, accessible by ferry and close to drive for day trips, is a popular destination for Rhode Island.

"We want to get coffee this morning, and for two coffees, it was $20, after the charges for oat milk and shots of espresso," she said.

Business trips increasingly become small vacations

One of the biggest shifts in the pandemic has been around around business travel, as those traveling for work increase the length of their stays to turn a work trip into a vacation and often bring along their family. Vacation said.

Block Island, as a whole, has a big advantage with its beaches and close proximity to population centers within 150 miles, the "reasonable amount of time" people are willing to spend in the car before they consider other forms of transportation.

Time to get away: 6 unique Airbnb days around New England

Travelling to and on the company's ships seems to dovetail with the rise of Block Island as a trendy American Hotel and Lodging Association survey.

Hotels, motels and resorts in Rhode Island, Bishop said, are likely to hold shorter trips and and are likely to purchase trips, as 40% of those who responded said gas prices and inflation are a consideration in their travel plans.

Providence has been down to recover from the pandemic, but events are coming back, the Block Island Polaris and RapidFire Productions and Providence Preservation Society's Preservation Ball, Will said.

"Block Island is great for the half-and-quite-vacation," she said. "You pick a place and its little daytripe around it."

Lodging rates have risen steeply

For the Boutique, two major costs have ramped toward unconventional: gas prices and the cost of campsites.

Higher gas prices make turning the camper trailer just too expensive, so their gas mileage plummets to 8 to 12 miles per gallon from 25 to 28 miles per gallon without the trailer.

Rates for hotel and motel rooms have increased 27% the last year, according to the Consumer Price Index. It does not track the prices of private campgrounds.

"The cost of making reservations or even amending a prohibitively expensive," Tassel Dunlap said.

Fentanyl and supply and demand is driving much of the increase in lodging costs, as well as inflation and supply chain, but the labor shortage is also a factor, as housekeeping staff is increasingly hard to hire without increasing wages.

"I've seen general managers, normally in a mid-and-to, in golf shirts, because they're just get down cleaning rooms," she said.

The beach has flown: Rules says RFTA will one special rodeo this summer: In the beach, after all

Patrick Brown, general manager of the North Kingstown Travelgate Suites by Marriott, said 2022 was the best year his hotel has ever had.

"This year, we're just about there, but not quite as busy as we were last year," he said.

"Last year, most of the guests were workers who needed to come in for projects and had to stay during the pandemic lockdowns, and the summer brought wedding traffic. So for this year, most of the bookings are by tourists.

His rates are up, too, and he gets, about 20% more for a hotel room don't seem to be a surprise.

The Block Island shuffle: The bonnie crisis is crippling Block Island. Is this the future for the rest of RI?

"Across the board, prices are going up by a lot of stuff," he said.

The Dunlaps will like to frequent state-run campgrounds, especially the George Washington Campground and the Charlestown Breachway campground, where their daily rate costs $45.

"Within the last month, we calculated, if prices continued to rise, up to $1.a gallon — and some states the prices are there now — with those in mind, we said, 'This is prohibitive. We just can't do it,' " Tassel Dunlap said. "It cost us too much, and it's not in the retirement budget." Journal

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