

The Miami Herald

December 20, 2012

Circulation: 160,505

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For S. Florida hotels, BCS championship a post-holiday gift

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This season is bringing some extra gifts for South Florida's tourism industry: Tuesday holidays that allow for extra-long weekends away from home and the college football championship that will extend festivities another week.

For locals who want to put relatives up in area hotels or just drive around town without traffic, the crush of visitors might be a bother, but hoteliers are happy to have the crowds.

"This season is going to be more robust than last year," said Howard Wolfson, vice president of operations for Hospitality America, which operates three Miami Hampton Inn locations.

While business typically drops off after New Year's Day, Wolfson said, that doesn't hold true this season.

"There's not much of a lull this year because of how the holiday falls in the middle of the week," he said. "More peo-

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Travel ahead? Here are some tips from the pros

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ple may be going on cruises or spending time with friends and family — or maybe they're waiting around for the bowl game."

More than 70,000 people — mostly Notre Dame and Alabama fans — are expected to attend the sold-out Discover BCS National Championship Game at Sun Life Stadium on Jan. 7, filling hotels from South Beach to Fort Lauderdale. The 79th annual Discover Orange Bowl on Jan. 1, with a match between Florida State and Northern Illinois University, isn't quite the draw but is expected to bring some visitors as well.

But even before the biggest game, South Florida is proving popular for Christmas and New Year's travelers.

Overall this season, the number of Americans traveling 50 miles or more from home between Saturday and Jan. 1 is expected to increase 1.6 percent to 93.3 million, according to AAA. In Florida, the number of holiday travelers is expected to hit 4.8 million, a 1.3 percent increase over last year.

While Miami International Airport is expecting a nearly 2 percent drop in passenger traffic between Fri-

day and Jan. 6 over last year — part of a national softening trend — the number of travelers still is expected to hit just more than two million. Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport expects more than a million passengers between Thursday and Jan. 2, an increase of 3-4 percent.

The Orbitz Holiday Travel Insider Index named Fort Lauderdale the third most popular destination for Christmas and fifth for New Year's, a ranking based on hotel bookings.

And Kayak.com, which lets users compare hundreds of travel sites, shows Fort Lauderdale at No. 5 and Miami at No. 7 based on searches for flights around Christmas; for New Year's, Miami is No. 4 and Fort Lauderdale is No. 6.

Bob Diener, president of lodging deals website getaroom.com, said Tuesday that for the last 21 days, Miami has been the fifth most popular spot for future bookings — and ranks fourth in terms of arrivals in the upcoming 21 days.

"You definitely have a very extended holiday period in Miami," Diener said. "Which none of my hotel friends are complaining about."

The Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa certainly has no

gripes.

The 998-room hotel in Hollywood is hosting Florida State for the Orange Bowl and Notre Dame for the championship — as well as hundreds more people for each time period.

"We are at 100 percent occupancy for both bowl games," said marketing manager Judy Erickson.

Erickson said the hotel is expecting different shifts of guests: those who are arriving early and staying Christmas, New Year's guests leaving a day or two after the official holiday and bowl game visitors arriving the Friday or Saturday before the game and staying until Tuesday.

"It's a good pattern," she said.

At the Clevelander and Essex House hotels in South Beach, rooms are nearly sold out during New Year's and the championship despite a three-night minimum. Marketing manager Anna Whitlow said the national championship is driving significant traffic — especially among Notre Dame fans.

"What we're seeing from Notre Dame is not only are they excited about the game, they're excited to experience Miami," she said. "And we're loving that. We're excited to host them."