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(continued)

# The COAST Is CLEAR

*After Hurricane Florence, the coastal Carolinas are riding a wave of optimism*

BY JEFF HEILMAN

Last September, Hurricane Florence deluged parts of the Carolinas. Hardest hit was North Carolina, with an estimated \$17 billion in crop, infrastructure and other losses. Florence went easier on South Carolina, which reportedly saw some \$607 million in damages.

Experiencing varying impacts, from minimal to destructive, the region's coastal destinations have made significant recovery and rejuvenation efforts since the floodwaters receded. Open for business and in expansion mode, the forecast is bright for 2019.

## North Carolina

Set along the Cape Fear River, historic Wilmington and its island beaches experienced significant flooding, power loss and damage from Hurricane Florence. Then local officials, business owners, residents and volunteers rolled up their sleeves and resiliently turned the tide in the city named one of TripAdvisor's 2018 Travelers' Choice "Top Destinations on the Rise."

"Wilmington is officially open for business," said Kim Hufham, president/CEO of the Wilmington and Beaches CVB. "While we lost two meetings in September and October because of the storm, they were able to rebook for 2019 and 2020. Based on our quick recovery, we do not anticipate that the storm will negatively affect future bookings."

Slated to run through January 2019, the bureau's "Comeback" campaign encourages groups to be part of Wilmington's comeback story by booking future meetings and events in the city.

"We are pleased to see many groups doing so already," Hufham said.

John W. Sneed II, vice president of sales and services, forecasts "a very positive" 2019.

"Booked meetings and events are even in fiscal year comparisons, but with increased convention district hotel inventory allowing us to host larger events, booked room nights increased by 83 percent," he said.

Recent openings include the 186-suite Embassy Suites by Hilton Wilmington Riverfront Hotel, offering 5,000-plus square feet of flexible space. Set within the nationally acclaimed River District and anchored by the 2,000-capacity Wilmington Convention Center, the convention district has experienced \$426.1 million in investments over the last five years.

"We expect this trend to continue for the foreseeable future with additional convention district and downtown hotels slated to open in the next three years," Sneed said.

At least six anticipated openings include the Arrive (spring 2019) and Aloft (2020/2021) hotels. Meanwhile, The Hotel Ballast, Tapestry Collection by Hilton recently completed an \$11 million renovation, including all ballrooms and meeting spaces.

In historic New Bern, inland flooding significantly damaged the city's three

WILMINGTON AND BEACHES CVB



HISTORIC CARRIAGE TOUR, CHARLESTON, S.C.

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downtown hotels, and filled the interior of the New Bern Riverfront Convention Center with three feet of water.

"Courtyard by Marriott is operating as the Riverfront Hotel until first-floor repairs are complete and they can resume operations under the Marriott flag," reported Tarshi McCoy, executive director of the New Bern-Craven County CVB. "Completely gutted and undergoing major renovations, the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel New Bern is aiming to reopen its main building in March 2019 and Inn Building in late August. With structural repairs now on an accelerated schedule, the convention center is projected to reopen in August."

The city otherwise got back on track, with nearly 70 percent of downtown businesses reopened a week after Florence, and thousands of celebrants enjoying the annual Mum Fest three weeks after the storm.

"We're optimistic for 2019," McCoy said. "With diverse other available venues, our hospitality partners are working together to accommodate groups that would normally book the convention center. With a little creativity, we are keeping the business in New Bern."

The Outer Banks went virtually unscathed, while the Crystal Coast is in confident rebound mode.

"While the Crystal Coast Civic Center suffered only minor damage, many of our lodging establishments were extensively hit," reported Jim Browder, executive director of the Crystal Coast Tourism Development Authority. "However, with our shoulder season immediately following the storm, we have the winter to rebuild and rejuvenate. Hotel partners are enhancing their sales and marketing efforts ahead of our 2019 spring season."

Home of the Cape Lookout National Seashore, the Crystal Coast's group market is driven by more than 400 annual events and festivals.

"Many of our groups return year after year as either participants or spectators," Browder said. "We anticipate a robust 2019."

## South Carolina

The Charleston region was fortunate to escape any significant physical damage from Florence, which had potentially threatened the Lowcountry before making landfall 200 miles to the north.

"While we were excited that our hotels, restaurants and other attractions were able to resume normal operations within one or two days, our prayers were with our neighbors in North Carolina and upstate South Carolina," said Michael Tall, chairman of the Board of Governors, Explore Charleston. "Despite visitation decreases from the threats of Hurricanes Florence and Michael, year-to-date data indicates that 2018 performed well, with 2019 looking strong. Inquiries are up compared to prior years, and our group sales team is optimistic about the forecast for meetings and conferences over the next 12 months."

Tall added that, "with the airlift growth we continue to enjoy, including new service in April 2019 between Charleston and London on British Airways, people from many more places can now more easily access the Charleston area for their business and leisure travel."

While diverting travel plans for some groups, Hurricane Florence spared most of the Myrtle Beach area, reported Bob Harris, Visit Myrtle Beach's new executive vice president of sales.

"With minimal damage from the hurricane, our businesses were poised to welcome visitors once conditions were normalized," Harris said. "With many meetings, conferences and events planned or rebooked for 2019, we project a successful year ahead."

The 250,000-square-foot Myrtle Beach Convention Center also foresees a sunny 2019 campaign.

"Total daily attendance exceeded 750,000 visitors in 2018, and exhibit hall occupancy topped out at 70 percent," said Brian Monroe, the venue's sales and

MYRTLE BEACH (S.C.) CONVENTION CENTER



marketing director. "The summer saw 80 consecutive event days. With 80 percent of our annual business coming from repeat clients, 2019 is shaping up as another banner year."

Myrtle Beach's vacation destination appeal factors significantly in attracting diverse tradeshow groups, from hardware sales to food products. Signature annual events include the Myrtle Beach World Amateur Handicap Championship.

Returning in August 2019 for its 36th edition, the world's largest amateur golf tournament features 3,000 golfers competing on more than 50 of Myrtle Beach's best golf courses. Significant new 2018 bookings included the Association of Biomolecular Resource Facilities Annual Conference, attended by scientists from around the world.



CAPE LOOKOUT, N.C.

CRYSTAL COAST TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Nearly \$500,000 in enhancements for the center's 25th anniversary included repainting the renowned Whaling Wall and creating a new entrance to the convention center from the Broadway at the Beach entertainment district.

Last September, local outlet the Island Packet reported "a sigh of relief" as Hilton Head avoided any impact from Florence. Following prior evacuations and damage from Hurricane Matthew and tropical storm Irma, it was welcome news indeed for the storied Lowcountry island.

Offering 3,000 hotel rooms and 150,000 square feet of flexible space in seven major properties including the Marriott Resort & Spa, Westin Resort & Spa, Sea Pines Resort and Montage Palmetto Bluff, the destination, behind more than \$400 million in recent resort and community enhancements, is well positioned for 2019. ■

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