



Camelback Mountain Waterpark in Tannersville, Pennsylvania, is the state's largest outdoor waterpark. The Mountain Waterpark as well as Camelback's Aquatopia Indoor resort are open at 50% capacity during Pennsylvania's Green reopening phase. [POCONO RECORD FILE PHOTO]

Escape to the Poconos

Could the Pocono tourism economy survive a second COVID-19 wave?

By Brian Myszkowski
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As the COVID-19 pandemic stretched from the spring to the summer, business owners and members of the tourism economy grew concerned: What would happen to the Poconos? Halfway throughout the season, it has become apparent that while the area has the ability to make it through the tough times, survival may require some changes.

While many people across the country were fearful to travel throughout the spring, that anxiety is easing up for the summer season. Airbnb locations are being booked up at an unprecedented rate. Resorts are reopening; trails and parks are welcoming visitors; outlet shopping is taking off again. It's almost as if the pandemic is out of sight, out of mind. Chris Barrett, president and CEO of Pocono Mountain Visitors Bureau, said that summer visitors have been flocking to the Poconos. Many residents have noted numerous front-planters through Monroe County and the surrounding region as of late, and it looks like business may only pick up in the near future.

See **TOURISM**, Page A2



Dealers wear 3-D shields as part of a new safety protocol at Mount Airy Casino Resort in Mount Pocono. [MICAELA HOOD/POCONO RECORD]

Tourism

Continued from Page A1

“We also saw on our own websites, we saw that the organic search numbers were fairly high, in fact, they were higher than comparable periods last year,” Barrett said. “And that’s without us spending a whole lot on marketing, so we knew that people had interest. They wanted to get out, there was some cabin fever.”

Barrett said that site searches are up 16% over last year’s numbers, even with 2019 being a good year for the PMVB. Clearly, people are searching for vacation ideas, though they’re avoiding the more common destinations that require air travel due to the potential for infection

Escape to the Poconos

Naturally, that means folks from New York, Philadelphia and the surrounding areas are more than willing to take a trip to the Poconos, as many people are venturing to more secluded, rural destinations.

“During the lockdown period, it was very clear that people were not going to fly domestically, they were not going to fly internationally, they were not going on a cruise, which meant that they were going to drive,” Barrett said. “And they were willing to drive 100, 200 mile radius away from their homes to see friends and family, and to engage in recreation activities where there’s a large outdoor component so they can social distance.”

Airbnb’s findings support those numbers, which the short-term rental hosting company announcing a near 100% increase in business throughout the Poconos as compared to last year. And their guest data supports Barrett’s statement as well: about half of those guests came from within 300 miles of the Poconos, while two-thirds came from within 500 miles.

For those with second homes in the Poconos, renting the place out through Airbnb can mean extra income, and for the renter, it can mean a better opportunity to socially distance while vacationing. According to a statement from Airbnb, three out of four surveyed guests said they would be more comfortable staying with their families in a listing as opposed to a hotel with other people. Features like private kitchens and laundry are big draws, too.



An employee at Jubilee Restaurant in Pocono Pines makes a drink behind a partition installed along the bar. [PHOTO PROVIDED]

An Enhanced Cleaning Protocol has also made guests more comfortable with staying in a rustic Pocono Mountain cabin as well. Airbnb provides a step-by-step cleaning handbook with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to “help guests elevate their cleaning practices and prepare their home for guests.”

“We’re perfectly positioned as a destination with the type of activities we have, and the location, the large population centers,” Barrett said.

Short-term rentals

Barrett said that one standout of the summer of COVID-19 is the availability of short-term rentals, especially in the Poconos. Traffic—which includes not only those from New York and New Jersey, but residents of counties surrounding the Poconos—has jumped over the course of the past few years, placing Monroe and the surrounding regions as a destination of interest. And that has only increased over the past few weeks.

“We started to see a lot of build up in people visiting our market using short-term rentals, so believe it or not, short-term rentals now are really a hot commodity, because people perceive that they can still stay over at a destination, they can get away from wherever they are, they don’t necessarily have to be around other people, and they can social distance,” Barrett said. “So our short-term rentals are doing fairly well, too.”

It’s not hard to see why. Living in a city means that your chances of running into people increases greatly, and the more people you interact with, the greater your chance to get the virus.

The great outdoors provide some distance and privacy for those looking for an escape.

And it’s not just vacationers, either. According to Barrett, the rental market also offers people an option to quarantine in the Poconos, away from the population density of the cities, for longer stretches of time as well.

“If people were in the city and they wanted to get away from the city, they came here, they took a rental for like 30 days and worked remotely from here,” Barrett said.

However, that doesn’t mean that visitors are skipping out on the big-name resorts, and all they have to offer.

“There’s still a lot of interest in the resorts, there’s still a lot of interest in the water parks, there’s still a lot of interest in the Skytop experience,” Barrett said. “There’s still a lot of interest in that even with the events being canceled, like fireworks around the 4th of July in a lot of different areas, a lot of the fairs being canceled and all those things. You’re still seeing people coming into the market and spending.”

What to do, what to do...

Monroe and the surrounding counties have come prepared with plenty of entertainment opportunities that can accommodate mitigation efforts, especially when it comes to the great outdoors. Feel like exploring the state parks, or maybe hitting the trails for a hike? Social distancing should be no problem!

Camelback Lodge and Resort opened on June 12. Their indoor water park, Aquatopia opened June 19, Camelbeach opened July 1. Camelbeach is the largest outdoor water park in Pennsylvania.

According to Shawn Hauver, President and Managing Director of Camelback Resort, the three month long closure during the COVID-19 pandemic forced the resort to rethink its entire guest journey from check-in through check-out.

“We started with the reservation process, staggering arrivals and

creating mobile check-ins,” said Hauver. “While people were still in their vehicles waiting, we did temperature scans, advised them of all our protocols, mask wearing and social distancing requirements.”

Upon entrance to the water park, guests as well as all staff, undergo a quick health scan and receive a wristband identifying that they have in fact passed the health check. Hauver feels this helps build confidence in their guests, from the very first touch point at check-in, that they have everything under control.

Hauver claims there are distancing signage and mask reminders everywhere, throughout the resort, as well as audio recordings in the water park. They have suspended valet service and are using door seals after rooms are sanitized as additional precautions.

Masks are required everywhere except when seated for dining or on the water park rides and wading pools. Hauver explained that being a water park hotel makes it unique and different in some ways.

“The CDC has always stated that viruses can’t be transmitted through properly treated water and we are under the tightest restrictions in terms of monitoring our chlorination and chemical balancing of water,” Hauver said. “In addition to all the computer monitoring, we also do periodic manual checks of water levels. Our outdoor water park is also unique, because it sits at the base of the mountain where it is very spread out. Sunlight and chlorine are two of the biggest enemies of this virus, so we really can create a safe and comfortable environment.”

The resort is operating at 50% capacity. Hauver said this has helped keep the lines down and adhere to the social distancing guidelines.

Hauver shared that while they are no longer experiencing the financial loss as during the shutdown, they are happy to achieve a break-even environment at this time.

Tourism

Continued from Page A2

"We consider it a victory of sorts," Hauver said. "We can keep our employees employed, continue supporting the local businesses that depend on us directly and indirectly, and being able to support the government through our tax revenue. It is all part of the bigger picture until we can get back to being profitable."

Hauver said Camelback currently employs approximately 1,200 employees. The normal staffing is anywhere from 1,000-1,500 at any given time, due to seasonality.

"I am confident that the protocols we have in place today are the right protocols, they are effective and are working," Hauver said. "I believe we are operating at maximum protection levels and are prepared for anything else."

According to Glenn Cademartori, Vice President of Marketing, Mount Airy Resort and Casino has experienced record breaking business after the three month-long closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The first week and a half after opening saw record days probably due to all the penned up demand from people not being able to get out and enjoy their casino experience," said Cademartori. "Even since then, we are still enjoying very strong numbers. It is very encouraging to see that even at the 50% capacity level; we are still seeing numbers similar numbers to last years."

Cademartori claims they have gone above and beyond all the guidance to get to this point and stay open. He lamented the losses and devastation that the closure caused to the region and area businesses.

"Since we've opened, we have implemented and followed all the CDC and department of health guidelines and protocols," said Cademartori. "Besides the mask requirements and social distancing, we have closed every other slot machine, removed every other chair at the gaming tables, put up face shields, and removed and or moved tables in the restaurants."

The casino has also temporarily become a smoke free facility. They have created a comfortable area outside to accommodate smokers until further notice.

Everyone that walks through either of the two casino entrances is being

scanned by a thermal reader that can scan up to 20 feet away. Cademartori claims it is a less invasive, high tech thermal temperature scanner.

Cademartori recalls his biggest challenges, "After all the adjustments were put in place, we had to learn how to live in this new normal. Although, it has been assuring to see how smoothly it has all gone and that business has largely been unaffected despite all the changes."

Cademartori said Mount Airy Casino will continue to follow all guidance and make any necessary adjustments. "We will do whatever adjustments or changes necessary to stay safe and stay open so we can continue to provide our guests with the best possible gaming experience."

"No one wants to be shut down again."

Problem areas

Unfortunately, increased traffic can cause complications for just about any venue in the pandemic, even the outdoors.

"The bad part of that is, our state and federal parks were overrun fairly quickly," Barrett said. "There were some problems that developed there, which I'm sure you probably saw with trash and all those other things. So that was a bad side effect of it."

In addition to that, in the midst of this revival, increased case counts across the state have spurred Governor Tom Wolf and Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine to institute further restrictions on restaurant capacity, which could deal a significant blow to the industry.

"Even though you can understand why, the logic behind it that the governor and the secretary of health explained, still, some of the smaller operations might not survive it," Barrett said.

Cafes and restaurants with only ten tables will be at a particular disadvantage, Barrett said, making it incredibly difficult to turn a profit. That doesn't mean that those establishments are throwing in the towel just yet, as some have been exploring some innovations to make it through the difficulties.

But the current state of eateries leaves owners and workers at a disadvantage, Senator Mario Scavello said.

"By cutting restaurants to 25%, you're not helping people, because you're pretty much closing the res-

taurant down," Scavello said. "At 50%, you're struggling. At 25%, it's a joke. What the governor did is put another stake in the back of business."

Scavello predicted that increased crowds in the Poconos could make it difficult to secure a seat at a restaurant, and this may inspire some visitors to cross a state border.

And that's not even mentioning the fact that owners and operators shelled out plenty of funding to set up proper seating for COVID-19 crowds, including barriers and sneeze guards. Now that capacity has been reduced, those safety mechanisms come off as a sunk cost.

"I think we were doing the right thing at 50%, we should have been going the opposite way rather than cutting it back," Scavello said.

Scavello said that even though lodging is blowing up in the area, entertainment and shopping opportunities have been limited, putting businesses in precarious situations for just about everyone, including visitors and workers.

"The state has one of the highest unemployment in the nation," Scavello said. "That tells you something, know what I'm saying? Secondly, the tourist areas get hit the hardest, and we were hit the hardest. So, we have a huge unemployment number in Monroe, and when you close three water parks, you're talking about 4,500 jobs. Just the water parks."

The future holds much uncertainty that will have an impact on the entire economy, including the Poconos' tourism, Barrett said. Who wins the election, the policies put in place to stimulate the economy, what state and local governments do in regard to the service economy – all these things could have a profound impact on the economic health of the area.

Fortunately, the Poconos have had a strong capability to reinvent themselves over the years, which will help to keep the region alive. Visionary and innovative leadership will be the backbone of the recovery, Barrett said, and with that drive, the Pocono Mountains will make it through summer, fall, winter, spring and beyond.

"It's always reinvented itself and risen above adversity and thrived, and I'm confident that will happen over time," Barrett said. "There's always peaks and valleys, and we have always emerged from those valleys much stronger."

— Pocono Record Writer Maria Francis contributed to this story