

Thousands of college students flock to South Padre for spring break

by Karen Brooks
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South Padre Island - The tide is high, and the groove is on.

This relaxed little island just off the coast of South Texas launched into the busiest week of spring break Saturday, with masses of college kids braving chilly weather to have, as one local lawyer put it, "a raucous good time."

They call it "Texas week" because most of the state's major universities are on break, and it brings a tsunami of change to the island as an estimated 150,000 visitors arrive with one mission: To play.

"Everybody comes down to see and be seen, to have a good time," said Marinda Reynolds, 21, a junior at the University of Rhode Island.

The population grows to 15 times its usual size. An estimated \$200 million pours into the economy. About 500 people will spend a few hours in jail.

This year, the economic effect may be slightly lower than in recent years when up to 180,000 people flocked to the resort, officials say. But the island needs as many tourist dollars as it can get as it recovers from the collapse of the Queen Isabella Causeway last year. Eight people were killed, and hundreds of millions of tourist dollars were lost.

Some tourists are staying away because it is harder to get into Mexico as a result of tighter border security after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

A national economic downturn and a recent drop in the number of airlines serving nearby Brownsville are also hindering tourism, said Dan Quandt, executive director of the South Padre Island Convention and Visitors Bureau. American Eagle pulled out of the area in September, and Minnesota-based Sun Country Airlines halted service to the area a few months ago.

But the island's residents face the hordes with confidence. Made famous just a few years ago as the featured spring break party host on MTV, South Padre Island is riding a crest so solid that the slight dip in this year's crowd causes little concern.

"We're strong and stable," Quandt said, "and from a national standpoint I think we've increased our awareness as a spring break destination."

If this year is going to be a slow one, it wasn't evident this weekend.

Despite rain and temperatures that dipped into the 50s, the students arrived en masse on Saturday and Sunday, changing the face of beach vacationing as most know it.

"It's not to say we don't have families who come here - we do - but spring break is not the time we'd say is family friendly," Quandt said.

"Playboy" magazine activities on the beach, bar parties sponsored by Nair for Men and Trojan condoms, binge drinking, dancing and sex in a cocktail are decidedly not for the weak of heart.

The bars are so busy that Los Angeles bartender Rob Whittemore flies into town simply for the money he can make for 12 days serving alcohol at Louie's, a local hot spot.

"It's a great time, and money is good," he said as a gaggle of Hawaiian Tropics models gyrated to cheer-

ing crowds on the dance floor behind him. "This is my fourth season. I never miss it."

It's not just the ambience of the island that changes during spring break. The entire town shifts to accommodate the onslaught.

With only 4,000 hotel rooms and rental condos available on the island, spring break spillover fills up hotels in Port Isabel across the causeway and in Brownsville, Texas, an hour's drive to the south.

Hotels raise their rates, sometimes double or more, and set up special registration and reception areas for students. The Sheraton Fiesta Beach Resort requires spring break partygoers to take an inventory of their rooms before they get their room keys. Students wear bright paper wristbands that identify their hotel.

The partying can get out of hand. Already, two sexual assaults have been reported by out-of-town revelers. Local law enforcement, federal border agents and state alcohol regulators are doubling or tripling their presence. Police expect to make about 500 arrests, mostly for public intoxication or DWI.

Most of those nailed for public intoxication, considering how many people are drinking, are not jailed, police Chief Robert Rodriguez said.

"These are the people who were in pretty bad shape," Rodriguez said of the arrests for public intoxication, an offense on par with a traffic ticket.

"It's no big deal," Reynolds said, noting that most students don't drive because of \$2 cab fares and free transportation services.

The Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission is doubling its personnel on South Padre to help stop underage drinking, Rodriguez said. But his officers will probably not stop people simply to check for open containers, he said.

Commission agents are conducting sting operations to hit both the suppliers and consumers, but officials say they expect that the kids will try.

"We know that young people will still ignore our warning and still try to get alcoholic beverages just because it's spring break, and it's the thing to do," said Greg Hamilton, the commission's chief of enforcement.

Spring Break by the numbers:
 Number of revelers expected on South Padre Island: 150,000
 Number of year-round residents: 2,400
 Number of hotel rooms and rental condos: 4,000
 Length of island: 34 miles
 Estimated economic impact on the island: \$200 million
 Gallons in the world's largest cocktail: 7,050
 Number of servings in the world's largest cocktail: 44,000
 Number of arrests expected: 500
 Amount of contract for new national Venus Swimwear model: \$100,000
 Number of restaurants: More than 50
 Number of grocery stores: 1

(Sources: South Padre Parade Magazine, South Padre Chamber of Commerce, Schlitterbahn)

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