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Summer in ALASKA

As interest grows, state looks to build on last year's record-setting season.



Guests on Collette's new "Alaska and the Yukon" tour can head into Denali National Park on the Alaska Railroad's first-class GoldStar service.

WITH AN UNSETTLED travel situation abroad, Americans planning to vacation closer to home this summer could be setting their sights on Alaska.

"We have...noticed a spike in business from travelers who were pursuing Europe in 2016," says John Hall Jr., vice president of Alaskan tour operator John Hall's Alaska. "The unfortunate events in Paris and Brussels have curbed travelers' plans and Alaska has become a destination of interest in this process."

The Zika virus — which is transmitted by mosquitoes in warm-weather destinations in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific — has also been drawing attention in the media recently. Alaska tourism experts we spoke with

say travelers are concerned, although those concerns may not be driving them to fly to Alaska specifically.

"People are concerned, but I haven't heard them say as much as, 'Gosh, I'm going to shy away [from destinations with Zika].'" says Kathy Dunn, Tourism Marketing Manager for the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development (DCCED).

Hall Jr. agrees. "When you look at the overall demographic of visitors to Alaska, the majority of travelers are active adults, most of who are past the time in their life when they are still expanding their families," he says. "Considering that the greatest threat of

Zika virus is to young expectant and new mothers, we have not noticed an impact or increase in our business."

This year will see the state looking to build on a record-setting summer season in 2015. When the full-year numbers for 2015 are available (defined as the summer months of 2015 and the fall and winter months of 2016), Dunn says that they expect to record over two million visitors — a first for the state.

"We had gotten an increase in funding, and so we were able to do large sponsorships and national TV buys," says Dunn. "So the level of awareness and interest in Alaska is really high right now." A large portion of that

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DESTINATIONS

growth is in air travel — a 13 percent increase in summer 2015 vs. a 3 percent rise in cruise volume, according to the latest DCCED statistics. Dunn says this is partly due to increased carrier capacity. Most notably, Delta started flying out of Sitka and Ketchikan last summer and it recently started service to Juneau as well.

While this year the DCCED does not have as much to spend on marketing, continued interest should still drive travel. One event to watch will be National Parks Centennial, which we profiled as part of our March 21 cover story. Additionally, Dunn says that the interest that has already been generated in Alaska travel will not go away soon.

“That awareness and interest isn’t going to drop for another year or so,” says Dunn. “We’re still expecting 2016 to be a record breaker.”

renovations at Denali Cabins and Denali Backcountry Lodge. The former is getting new carpeting and wood laminate flooring, plus new sinks, vanities and bathroom fixtures. Also, some bathrooms that had been open-air near the ceiling will now be enclosed. At the Backcountry, the main lodge’s second floor will be updated with a new bar and lounge. This summer also marks the 20th anniversary of operations on Fox Island for Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge and Kenai Fjords Tours.

Collette is rolling out a new, 13-day tour, “Alaska and the Yukon,” that goes roundtrip from Anchorage. Guests visit Whittier, where they can cruise Prince William Sound and Blackstone Bay for glacier and wildlife viewing, before heading to Tok, a small town that was once a trade center for travelers to and from Canada. Also on offer is the chance to enjoy first-class GoldStar



This summer the newly combined CIRI Alaska Tourism Corporation and Alaska Denali Travel are rolling out new renovations at their wilderness lodges.

New Land Options

As tourists are set to flock to the state, wilderness lodge and tour operators are stepping up their offerings. Most notable is the recent acquisition of CIRI Alaska Tourism Corporation (CATC) by Alaska Denali Travel (ADT).

This summer, all existing sales contacts and booking process for the two companies will remain the same, says ADT VP Thomas McAleer. In the fall, ADT and CATC will begin to

streamline sales and customer support to provide a single experience for travel agents and guests. There is no plan to change the commission policy for either company. CATC pays 10 percent on all products booked through Alaska Heritage Tours and ADT offers a 10 percent commission for its locally owned brands, or a 5 percent commission for its third-party products.

In terms of products, this summer ADT and CIRI are rolling out reno-

service on the Alaska Railroad into Denali National Park, where a guided Tundra Wilderness Tour awaits, as well as a ride along the scenic Top of the World Highway.

John Hall’s Alaska is expanding the number of departures on its “Denali Explorer” and “Grand Slam Alaska” itineraries, each of which include a sailing exclusively for John Hall guests onboard *Alaskan Dream Cruises’ Baranof Dream*. A land-only version of both tours is also available. For guests who want to enjoy the National Parks Centennial, the 12-day land / seven-night cruise “National Parks of Alaska Tour” visits five of Alaska’s eight National Parks: Katmai, Wrangell-St. Elias, Gates of the Arctic, Denali and Kenai Fjords. Additionally, a two-day land / seven-day cruise package with Alaskan Dream Cruises will travel the Inside Passage, with stops in Glacier Bay, Juneau, Tracy

Arm Fjord, Wrangell, Kake and more.

Tauck will offer four Alaska itineraries, the newest being “Wild Alaska,” which was introduced last summer as part of the company’s partnership with BBC Earth; it is one of the company’s fastest-growing domestic itineraries this year. This small-group itinerary (maximum 26 guests) offers experiences ranging from flightseeing in Denali to bear-watching, a Kenai Fjords cruise and a meet-and-greet with champion sled dogs. For families, Tauck Bridges’ “Alaska: Call of the Wild,” also part of the BBC Earth partnership, visits Alaskan Huskies in training and includes a jet boat ride. “Grand Alaska” combines a week’s cruise on the *Princess* with a Denali visit, flightseeing, rafting in a bald eagle reserve and a chance to see the state by rail. “Alaska’s Inside Passage” sails that waterway onboard *Le Soléal*.

—ADAM LEPOSA