

Nearly 48M expected to travel this July Fourth

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Prepare to share the road and sand in another week or so.

AAA is predicting a whopper of a travel frenzy this July Fourth.

It predicts 47.7 million Americans will be motoring on the nation's roads during the holiday. That volume will not only eclipse last year's number by a mile, when COVID-19 anchored Americans to their homes, but it also will come within 2.5 percent of matching the record set in 2019. Volume will be up by at least 40 percent, AAA estimates.

A large percentage of Independence Day road travelers will head for lakes, rivers and shorelines, including the islands and beaches of the Golden Isles. AAA's travel figures include 1.5 million Georgians, 33 percent more than in 2020.

"Travel is back this summer as Americans eagerly pursue vacations they've deferred for the last year-and-a-half," said Debbie Haas, vice president of Travel for AAA, the Auto Club Group. "We saw strong demand for travel around Memorial Day and the kickoff of summer, and all indications now point to a busy Independence Day."

Few know that better than the local tourism industry. An active season is keeping it on its feet.

"We anticipate a very busy Fourth of July holiday this year," said Scott McQuade, president and CEO of the Golden Isles Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Looking at our bookings for July and the holiday weekend, we expect to be at full capacity on the islands and see overflow traffic extend to the mainland."

It's a trend that began earlier this year.

"We have seen record numbers of visitors come into the Golden Isles since March, and we expect that trend to continue throughout the entire summer," McQuade said.

McQuade said the fact that July Fourth falls on a Sunday this year will be beneficial to the industry and economy.

"When the Fourth of July falls on a weekend, we actually see a boost both the week before and the week after the holiday," he said. "We expect to see some visitors arrive prior to the weekend for the holiday and other segments arrive for the weekend and extend their stay until the following week."

"This Fourth of July will kick off what we anticipate will be our busiest July on record."

Those traveling outside of the Golden Isles may stumble upon costly downside to seeking fun and relaxation elsewhere.

According to GasBuddy, gas prices at the pumps in some areas of the country are as high as \$3.13 for a gallon of regular unleaded. That reflects an increase of 93 cents over the \$2.16 average price during last year's holiday.

Travel predictions coincide with the release of a grim report requested by the U.S. Congress on the condition of interstates, a highway system that turned 65 this year. The study focused on traffic flow and the deteriorating condition of many roadways, bridges and overpasses due to age, heavy use and lack of investment.

The findings were reported by TRIP, a nonprofit organization that researches surface transportation issues.

"The report released by TRIP confirms what American businesses experience every day — our interstate highway system, which was once the envy of the world, is in serious need of modernization," said Ed Mortimer, vice president of transportation infrastructure, U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "Commitment to modernization must be shared by federal, state and local leaders as well as the private sector. The interstate system plays a key national role in

economic success and quality of life for every American."

With 57 percent of its interstates congested during peak hours, Georgia's interstate system is the 12th worst in the nation, according to the report. California tops the awful-interstate system list with a congestion rate of 87 percent. Florida ranks 5th at 70 percent.

Georgia also ranks 12th in number of interstate fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles driven. In 2019 the rate was .71 percent, high compared to other states but lower than the 1.26 percent rate of the Peach State's other highways. Wyoming was the deadliest, the death rate along its interstate system reaching 1.36 percent and 1,48 percent on its other highways. Florida ranked 10th with a .72 percent interstate fatality rate and 1.56 percent fatality rate on other highways.

Driving to Atlanta? Flying might be better. In addition to the time-savings, consider this: two interstates serving the capital city are among the nation's worst bottlenecks for commercial truck traffic. Interstate 285 at I-85 north is the 3rd worst in the nation; I-75 at I-285 north is the 16th worst.

Seth Millican, executive director of the Georgia Transportation Alliance, says it's time to focus on the interstate system.

"This new data from TRIP dramatically underscores the critical need for significant additional investment in our nation's highways, bridges, and freight and logistics infrastructure," he said. "With one of the most successful and fastest growing ports in the United States, Georgia is at the epicenter of that need. Fortunately, through the Georgia Commission on Freight and Logistics, Georgia's elected leaders are intent on addressing some of those challenges."