

## Visit Florida films ads to help bring visitors back after hurricane

Tourism marketers hope they can persuade people to look beyond the wreckage of Hurricane Ian and visit places like Jacksonville.

The state's tourism-marketing agency has begun efforts to offset images of Ian damage, taping "blue sky footage of unaffected areas of the state" for an upcoming promotional campaign. Jacksonville, Amelia Island and St. Augustine are among the destinations.

"This content, along with (public relations) programming and talking points, will be ready to go when the time is right for statewide promotion, including banner ads, video and social (media)," Visit Florida said in a news release.

The agency didn't give a timeline about when the ads would start to run. Visit Florida paused advertising campaigns last month as Ian hit Southwest Florida and moved across the state.

The agency has already recorded images of Orlando, Miami, Tampa, Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Pensacola, Destin, Tallahassee and Amelia Island for the post-storm effort and will film in St. Augustine and the Florida Keys, the news release said.

Visit Florida has similarly worked to offset past negative media coverage from hurricanes and issues such as the Zika virus and algae blooms.

Also under development, according to Visit Florida, is a package for the heavily impacted areas "when they are ready to welcome visitors again."

— *wjct.org*



Tampa Bay Times Photo by Dirk Shadd

Hurricane Ian uprooted the Wish Tree in the Dali Museum garden Sept. 29 in St. Petersburg.

## Central Florida DMOs face challenges

Steve Hayes, like so many across Tampa Bay, is feeling grateful. National forecasters had predicted Tampa Bay's century-long streak of hurricane luck was about to end. The region was looking at 10 feet of storm surge. Billions in property damage.

But the disaster arrived about 75 miles to the south. Now, Hayes, the CEO of Pinellas County's tourism agency, Visit St. Petersburg/Clearwater, and other leaders of Tampa Bay's tourism industry say they are trying to tread a careful line: letting visitors know the region is open for business, while also being mindful that vast swaths of the state are reeling from destruction.

"It's a very delicate message," Hayes said, adding that Visit St. Pete/Clearwater has paused advertising in Central Florida, the

Fort Myers area and Sarasota.

"Our airports are open, our port is open, our hotels are open, our attractions are open. We have to make sure that business continues to thrive," said Santiago Corrada, CEO of Hillsborough County's tourism arm, Visit Tampa Bay. "But it is with a heavy heart, because we have a great relationship with all of our friends down the west coast of Florida."

The agencies' social media feeds, brimming with pictures of sunsets and smiling families, are now peppered with information on how to help with hurricane relief efforts.

Businesses and beachfront owners from Clearwater Beach to Pass-a-Grille were among the first to be evacuated in Pinellas County. But after shifting south, Hurricane Ian

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## Central Florida DMOs face challenging recovery from damage

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left little damage and a sense of relief. In St. Petersburg, the Dalí Museum's famous Wish Tree was ripped from the garden, but the building and its contents went unharmed.

Meanwhile, in the state's southwest, roads became rivers, homes and business swallowed by water. Survivors now sift through the ruins of their slice of paradise. Many of the hotels still standing remain booked, filled not with vacationers but with those looking to escape the wreckage or those without homes to return to.

Visit Sarasota County paused their digital advertising campaign before Ian's landfall. "It remains paused," said Vice President Erin Thomas Duggan. "We're welcoming visitors back, as safety measures permit."

Visit Florida, the state's official tourism body, also paused advertising as it crafted a "recovery plan" campaign to offset the negative images of washed-out communities and damaged bridges from Hurricane Ian.

The most hurricane-ravaged state in the country is also home to license plates proclaiming "endless summer," 825 miles of sandy beaches and the world's most visited theme park. Florida ranks among the most visited states by both domestic and foreign tourists. Orlando alone welcomed 59.3 million visitors last year.

The state's tourism industry had been roaring back after two years of a pandemic.

Local tourism leaders are keen to



Tampa Bay Times Photo by Douglas R. Clifford

The random nature of the devastation is revealed in this photo from Mexico Beach.

continue the upward trajectory, spreading the word that the region is unscathed with open arms.

Both Tampa International Airport and St. Pete-Clearwater International shuttered for less than 72 hours during Ian. Neither sustained extensive damage. A couple of conventions set to take place in Tampa were canceled during the week of the storm, as was another that would have taken place this week, Corrada said. "Now, we want people to know we're open for business."

The same sentiment rings true in the state's northeast: "Ian has moved along and things have returned to normal," said a news release from St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra and The Beaches Visitors & Convention Bureau.

Meanwhile, Tampa Bay is gearing up for what leaders hope will be a busy winter and spring.

"We'll do it in a sensitive way," Corrada said. "But we really do need to make sure that the economic engine of tourism continues to run."

The Sunshine State's leisure and hospitality sector employs more than 1.2 million people, a 9.6% increase from last year, according to the state's Department of Economic Opportunity.

"Florida is a very large state with a very large tourism industry. Even though Ian was a very large storm that hit a large swath of our state, most of it, on a macro level, will recover very quickly," said Kevin Murphy, a professor of hospitality management at the University of Central Florida.

"Florida is a place people want to go, and what impacts that more than anything is the overall health of the U.S. economy," he said.

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