

Russ Lemmon: Vero Beach poised to become a prime 'staycation' destination

By Russ Lemmon

Monday, May 4, 2009

An assortment of Lemmon Drops culled from a trip to the cyberspace graveyard to visit a fact-challenged local blogger:

- Brutal summers and hurricanes aside, I can think of only one drawback to living in southern Florida.

Weekend driving trips to out-of-state locales are, for the most part, out of the question.

So, for millions of Floridians, the concept of “staycation” — where you try to save money by taking a vacation close to home — is second nature.

Vero Beach is poised to become one of the state’s top staycation destinations.

On the popular travel Web site expedia.com, only two hotels on the Treasure Coast are rated four stars (out of five) — and both are in Vero Beach. They are Costa d’Este and Vero Beach Hotel & Spa.

The latter is the only AAA Four Diamond hotel between Jupiter and Daytona Beach.

“There’s such a competition right now for Florida residents,” said Marco Scherer, general manager of the Vero Beach Hotel & Spa.

And why not? Because of geography, we are a captive audience.

Vero Beach Hotel & Spa is trying to lure Florida residents with an \$89 rate Sunday through Thursday. (It’s targeting out-of-state residents with the catchy marketing slogan, “\$109 with a bottle of wine.”)

“We want to push ourselves as a destination,” Scherer said.

The 113-room hotel, managed by San Francisco-based Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, uses Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as marketing tools.

In its promotional video on YouTube (2 minutes, 52 seconds), Vero Beach Hotel & Spa heaps much praise on the city — calling it “one of the last unspoiled beach towns on Florida’s east coast.”

The final line of the video: “Unlike other Florida coastal towns, Vero Beach has been able to retain its Old Florida charm due to its relaxed atmosphere, kind-hearted residents and strict zoning restrictions.”

Sounds like Vero Beach has a new best friend.

"No one knows of Vero unless they've been here before," Scherer said.

One thing that struck him when he first drove into town, after exiting Interstate 95, is that there are no signs on State Road 60 telling visitors how far it is to the beach. He would like to see the city promote Ocean Drive more because it is the "epicenter" of tourism in the county.

"Focus on your strength," he said. "That makes your strength even stronger."

- Regular readers may recall a column in 2007 about the lack of pet-friendly hotels in Indian River County.

I'm happy to report that Vero Beach Hotel & Spa is now a pet-friendly hotel.

- Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) will conduct a "table-top drill" Wednesday to test the preparedness and response capabilities of the 40-plus organizations.

One of the three scenarios is a late addition.

"One scenario we have is actually a flu," emergency management consultant Paul Seldes said. "What I did is change 'avian' to 'swine.' We want to keep it current."

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