

# Long Beach

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## Hospitality Industry Holding Up Despite Loss Of Key Conventions

Reinvestment, Short Term Bookings Vital; Hotel Occupancy Rates Improving



### Explore Rainbow Harbor

Dan Salas, owner of Harbor Breeze Cruises at Rainbow Harbor's Dock 2, is enthusiastic about Long Beach – and whale watch cruises. He owns six boats, four of which are named after his wife, daughters and son. Pictured, from left, are Christopher, Caroline, Kristina and Karin Lynn. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **SEAN BELK**  
Staff Writer

**H**oteliers and event planners are preparing for growth as business meetings and hotel room night stays gradually come back and major renovations get underway this year. But clients are still hesitant to sign long-term contracts in a tenuous economic climate, according to Long Beach tourism and hospitality executives.

Although sales revenue has held up well with a positive trend in short-term bookings and hotel occupancy, managers and planners are adjusting to the loss of key conventions and special events this year that may create some downtime in the second half of the year.

California's new First Lady, Anne Brown, nixed the annual Women's Conference, which in the past drew hundreds of famous speakers and thousands of attendees to the Long Beach Convention &

Entertainment Center in October. At the same time, the American Kennel Club moved its December national championship dog show – which expects more than 25,000 attendees – back to the East Coast, after being held in Long Beach for the past five years.

Another blow to the industry was the cancellation of Hot August Nights, once envisioned as a three-day classic car show in downtown to go alongside the Reno-born event's 25th anniversary. The organization pulled out of its six-year contract just months before the event because of a lack of entries and sponsorships. The event was to bring \$372 million in economic impact to the city, according to organizers.

Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), said the loss of business this fall should make for a “challenging” fourth quarter and such conventions during the holidays are tough to replace. But, he said it's

still too early to tell what the impact may be.

The CVB has been able to capture business from a new industry cycle of short-term bookings through offering clients monetary incentives and extra value by collaborating with hotel partners, Goodling said. “Short term requests for meetings has been on the upswing,” he said. “We have doubled our production of room nights year-over-year,” and added that at the same time, business within the next 12 months has also doubled.

One example is Collaborative Care, an organization of prime medical executives which has booked a two-year contract for 2011 and 2012 to bring in specialist and scientific attendance and more than 5,000 room nights, according to Iris Himert, senior vice president of sales for the CVB. The booking should help alleviate the loss this fall, and other events and conventions should provide for a strong summer as well, she said.

The new focus on providing incentives through funds from the city's tourism busi-



## Long Beach Puts On Full-Court Press In D.C.

Backed by the mayor, airport manager, convention center manager, hotel managers, hospitality industry representatives and staff, the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau swarmed the nation's capitol last week in an effort to attract more conventions and meetings to Long Beach. Led by CVB President/CEO Steve Goodling, the group hosted upwards of 225 meeting planners and association representatives for lunch and other events. Goodling said that more associations are based in Washington, D.C., than any other city, "so we have to go to them and sell our city as a great place for hosting their meetings, conventions, trade shows, etc." Pictured, left to right, are: Art Scanlon, CVB; Mario Rodriguez, Long Beach Airport manager; Ed Proenza, Ensemble Partners and CVB Chairman of the Board; Veronica Quintero, SMG; Brad Eng, Hilton Long Beach; Nancy Canzone, Hyatt Regency Long Beach; Goodling; Nusrat Mirza, Renaissance Long Beach general manager; Bianca Ware, Marriott; Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster; Traycee Mayer, Long Beach Convention Center & Entertainment Center general manager; Marc Choplick, Westin Long Beach general manager; Regina Richardson, CVB; Allison Lesser, CVB; Heather Gonzalez, Westin Long Beach; Chris Zappia, CVB; Sarah Nguyn, CVB; Ken Tippie, Queen Mary; Joan Cantarelli, CVB; and Paul Romero, CVB. (Photography by ChuckFazio.com)

ness improvement district has enabled the CVB to compete against other nearby destination cities, Goodling said. "For us, it put us ahead in many cases of other cities such as Huntington Beach or San Diego, or even other places like Seattle," he said.

CVB members and city officials, including Mayor Bob Foster, in recent weeks attended promotional meetings in Washington, D.C. – considered the main hub for national associations and conventioners – touching base with nearly 225 potential customers and clients to pitch Long Beach's valued assets and drum up potential business. Although many East Coast clients are still discovering Long Beach, positive testimonials have helped create relationships and push for repeat and new business, Goodling said.

The overall hotel market this year has already improved dramatically over 2010, a sign association and meeting business is starting to pick up again, he added. The market in 2012 is also expected to see increases, while 2013 is already booked 50 percent ahead of pace. According to statistics provided by the CVB, the city's RevPAR (revenue per available room) – a gauge of the industry's economic health – is up 11.5 percent over last year, which is well above projections.

"I think people are adjusting to this new sense of where we are and they've decided that it's in their own best interest that they

start attending meetings," Goodling said. "It's turning out a lot better than anyone projected at the beginning of the year."

### Convention Center Reinvented With 'Boutique' Ambiance

Part of what has kept Long Beach fresh and relevant has been a collaborative effort to renovate facilities throughout the city, which is also a way to generate sales, provide more value and stay competitive. Currently, more than \$55 million is being spent citywide on renovations to hotels, the convention center and public space areas.

The Long Beach Convention Center has received roughly \$5 million in upgrades, mainly through funds earmarked by the city's tidelands operating fund, for new carpets and restrooms of the promenade area to provide a more sophisticated look with a "boutique-style" ambiance.

"We have a lot of energy and we're all moving in a real positive direction," said Traycee Mayer, the convention center's new general manager, who brings 22 years of hotel management experience. "The improvements that we're getting with the city support is just amazing and we're going to do everything we can to bring that return for them."

Earlier this year, the convention center completed replacing the Terrace Theater's 3,021 seats in addition to more than \$250,000 in new furniture seats throughout

the Promenade to create "mini pods" for attendees to meet and network, and new lounge-style seating in the SAVOR Café. Renovations also included upgrades to the Green Room with new carpet, contemporary lighting and marble counter tops.

Outside the convention center, the Long Beach Transit Gallery and Promenade Walkway in downtown underwent a combined \$9 million in renovations that included extensive soft lighting along the street and upgrades to bus shelters, along with landscaping and kiosks.

The focus of drawing more attendance to the convention center, which is managed by SMG, formerly Spectacor Management Group, in collaboration with the CVB, is to keep schedules busy as possible with events, conventions and performances of all kinds, Mayer said.

Attendance and sales for shows and live performances at the Terrace Theater and the Long Beach Arena this year have been up and down, but overall have done well, she said. "I would say we're stronger this year in the amount and type of events we've been able to get booked and make happen," she said.

Shows this year have included Disney On Ice and top-notch musical acts such as Rise Against, Jackson Browne and Crosby and Nash, all of which were sold out. A concert next month by Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam is sold out as well. Mayer added that such



Steve Goodling, left, president and CEO of the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), with Ed Proenza, vice president of Ensemble Hotel Partners, LLC, and the chairman of the CVB Board of Directors. Ensemble is involved with three hotel properties: The Hotel Maya and Residence Inn by Marriott on the Queensway Bay and the Doubletree by Hilton in Carson. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

popular performers might take longer, most of the time years in advance, to book.

One new convention this year includes the TEDxSoCal, a daylong conference and interactive experience that features short talks and performances, similar to the TED Conference in February, but smaller and open to the public. The July 16 event to be held at the Center Theatre includes a long list of local luminaries and inspirational performances.

Conventions for 2012 include a conference by the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin – expected to bring 2,000 total room nights and \$1.8 million in economic impact – and the Pro Walk/Pro Bike Conference in September.

“It seems like every week we got a handful of site inspections so there’s a lot going on right now and I’m guessing very shortly we’ll start closing a lot of those contracts,” Mayer said. “I have all of the directors come and meet the customers so we make the big impact and the first impressions to let them know this team is really committed . . . We’re just trying to please our audience, which is quite broad, and bring something for everybody.”

### **Hotels See Rise In Occupancy**

As predicted by national tourism industry consultants, hotels have seen a steady

increase in sales and occupancy this year over 2010, much in line with the recovering economy. The city’s overall hotel occupancy rate, according to the CVB, is up 6.3 percent from last year, averaging in the mid 70 percent range.

As more guests fill up rooms, hotels have now started to back off on discount prices and some have even begun raising rates. Statistics show the city’s average daily room rate, known as ADR, is currently up 4.8 percent from last year, which can be tough on customers, but allows hotels to regain much of the revenue lost during the recession.

Nusrat Mirza, general manager of the Renaissance Long Beach Hotel, said a near 6 percent increase in both revenue and occupancy rate has now given the hotel the ability to hire more people. In addition, the hotel’s SIP Lounge restaurant has seen a 30 to 40 percent growth in sales.

But, he added, it is a struggle to increase rates in a still slow-recovering economy. “What we’re finding is the increase in the rate is a challenge,” he said. “There’s an indicator for increasing revenues by more people staying in the hotels, but our goal is also to increase revenue [with] a little bit [higher] room rate.”

To make up for the loss in some convention business this fall, he said the hotel is working on some specials for the holiday

season, Mirza said, adding that more attendance at city events has been a draw for guests at the hotel this year, such as during the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach and Long Beach Pride festival. “The growth that we’ve seen in 2011 is just going to continue, and 2012 will be a great year for us,” he said.

Ed Proenza, vice president of Ensemble Hotel Partners, LLC, which co-owns the Residence Inn by Marriott and Hotel Maya, both on Queensway Bay, and a Doubletree by Hilton in Carson, said a steady increase in sales has been primarily driven by business and leisure travelers while group travelers haven’t been as strong.

“We’re starting to see the improvement in the economy, both nationally and somewhat locally,” he said. “What we’re seeing is some of the companies are starting to book meetings, but the spending that’s taken place has been celebratory things. The weddings business is very, very strong, along with retirement parties and engagement parties.”

Ensemble recently closed on a joint venture investment for the two hotels with New York-based real estate investment trust Carey Watermark, which allows the firm to open up more financing in the event of purchasing or building more hotel properties. The Maya is up about 25 per-



Traycee Mayer, the general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, holds up a sample of the newly designed carpets to be installed in the convention center as part of \$5 million in upgrades to provide a more “boutique” hotel-like experience. At right, new carpet, contemporary lighting and marble counter tops were installed as part of new renovations to the Green Room of the convention center. The facility has replaced all 3,000 seats in the Terrace Theater, upgraded the SAVOR Cafe with new lounge-style seating, renovated bathrooms and provided steel case furniture throughout the Promenade to create ‘mini pods’ for attendees to meet and network. (Photographs by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

cent from last year, while the Residence Inn is up about 16 percent, he said. Both hotels are running occupancy rates in the mid 70s, he said.

Proenza, who is the chair of the CVB board of directors, said the loss of conventions this year should hopefully be picked up by stronger leisure customers during the weekends. He added that while short-term bookings are a positive sign for the market, they can be a challenge to handle since it’s more difficult to hire and train new service staff in a short amount of time.

The AVIA Hotel, which opened at The Pike at Rainbow Harbor in 2009, has seen possibly the most increase in sales activity and occupancy this year, though primarily due to being the newest hotel in Long Beach, said the hotel’s general manager, Bob Haury. The boutique hotel is also considered one of the smallest hotels with only 138 rooms, offered as an alternative with European spa bathrooms.

The hotel’s occupancy rates have jumped from 40 percent to 70 percent just in the last year, while revenue growth has ranged from a 20 to 60 percent increase year-over-year, he said. “We’re the newest addition in the downtown, so we stand to do better,” Haury said. “My revPARs are up 20 percent, but again that’s the advantage that a new property has. I will never be able to sustain that next year.”

### Renovations Move Forward

More revenues due to increased sales this year has also opened up more available financing for hotel renovations that had

been put off for the last few years during the recession. Renovations at hotels throughout the city are expected to cost a total of more than \$40 million, according to the CVB.

The Westin in Downtown Long Beach, for instance, is putting forward more than \$10 million in overall renovations over two to three years for new carpet and furniture in the lobby and restaurant in addition to improvements to meetings space, elevators and the pool deck. The first phase of room renovations are expected to start in November with all upgrades completed by early 2013.

Although moving forward with renovations at this time can still be risky, many hotels strategize ahead of the market and are preparing for when the economy fully rebounds, said Marc Choplick, general manager of The Westin, who said the market continues to be group-driven. “Our plan is to be ready when [the economy] really kicks in,” he said. “We’re all trying to drive more business back to the city and we think it’s coming.”

The Hyatt Regency downtown is also moving forward with major renovations, costing more than \$21 million, expected to begin in October and be completed in the first quarter of 2012. Renovations of that hotel include upgrading the 508 guest rooms, 20 suites and corridors, including carpets wall covering, window treatments and bathrooms, in addition to \$3 million for replacing heating and air conditioning units.

George Maragos, general manager of the Long Beach Airport Marriott, said the

hotel’s more than \$10 million renovation is primarily focused on upgrading facilities to accommodate business transient guests, which remains the hotel’s “bread and butter.” Improvements include upgrading all meeting rooms, ballrooms, ballrooms, pre-function areas, grand corridor and function area bathrooms.

“We are definitely anticipating that as this building is coming back on line, we will be a brand new building and it will generate significantly more revenue than it did in the past,” Maragos said. “We’ve listened to our customers and designed our renovation to take advantage of what they want.”

Although the hotel began the year in a renovation phase, with meeting and banquet facilities closed off, it was still able to “produce very good numbers,” he added.

Renovations also include adding 1,700 square feet of space for an outdoor courtyard along with current executive administrative offices being converted into four additional meeting rooms to total approximately 2,200 square feet.

In addition, \$500,000 went to renovating the hotel’s indoor pool and the fitness center is doubling in size to 1,700 square feet with the latest state-of-the-art equipment. It’s expected to be completed by the end of July as “one of the nicest hotel fitness centers on the West Coast,” Maragos said.

Maragos expects the new 155-room Courtyard by Marriott being proposed on a 4.5-acre site at Douglas Park to be a welcome addition to the area. “Who knows? We may be able to work in collaboration to



Rainbow Harbor, across from Shoreline Village. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

bring more business out to the airport area," he said.

### Aquarium Kicks Off Expansion, New Exhibits

One of the main attractions for the city has been the Aquarium of the Pacific, which is in the midst of a \$50 million expansion project.

The project, which should be fully completed in the next five to six years, is expected to include a two-story addition called "Pacific Visions," enlargement of

the entrance lobby and retail area (breaking ground this year), a 350-seat theater, new public restrooms and an 11,520-square-foot digital display sign.

Additionally, before the end of the year, the Aquarium is expected to break ground on a new Magellanic penguin exhibit, which should be open to the public next year.

After finishing the energy-efficient, 2,500-square-foot watershed exhibit and the new Molina Animal Care Center, the Aquarium recently opened its new Ocean Science Center gallery that features a new

technology-based exhibit called "Science On a Sphere" – a multimedia experience examining the impacts of pollution, climate change and related items.

The Aquarium recently launched a new exhibit titled "Arctic & Antarctic: Our Polar Regions In Peril." The exhibit focuses on educating the public about climate change.

Part of the new exhibit includes an Arctic fox named "Sitka" near Lorikeet Forest. Plans call for two new Arctic fox pups to be added for public viewing. The exhibit also

## Aquarium's New Exhibits Focus On Climate Change

Arctic Fox, Moon Jellies And 'Science On A Sphere' Among New Attractions

A lot is changing at the Aquarium of the Pacific, including the climate.

Exotic creatures that normally dwell among the coldest fringes of Earth have come to live at the Aquarium, for one specific reason: to spread awareness of their changing environments and the dangers they face. Scientists theorize that melting ice caps in the Arctic and Antarctic circles pose a threat to wildlife habitats and communities, both globally and locally.

It's part of the Aquarium's new focus on climate change to demonstrate the profound effects that rising temperatures has on the world's Polar Regions and local coastlines. In the last half-century, scientists have documented the gradual increase of global warming, the phenomenon of melting ice caps and their connection to sea level rise.

Titled, "Arctic & Antarctic: Our Polar Regions In Peril," the new exhibition offers unique digital displays and galleries of live polar animals. "It focuses on what's happening in both the Arctic and the Antarctic and why there are early signs of climate change for the planet and why we need to pay attention to those signals that we're receiving," said Jerry Schubel, president and CEO of the Aquarium.

The new live animal exhibit features Alaskan king crabs, feather stars, northern anchovies, lion's mane jellies, Arctic char, pteropods and krill, along with an interactive touch tank that allows visitors to touch moon jellies.

An Arctic fox named "Sitka" is featured in an exhibit near Lorikeet Forest and is participating as a program animal in daily shows for the public. Noticeable with white coats of fur, Arctic foxes are



The Arctic Fox "Sitka" can be found near Lorikeet Forest at the Aquarium of the Pacific. (Long Beach Business Journal photograph by Carlos Delgado)

incredibly resilient, able to withstand a wide range of temperatures, from 59 degrees below zero to the temperate Southern California climate, according to Aquarium staff. "They're very shy animals, but

we'll walk him around more than several times a day," Schubel said.

The Aquarium was limited in the types of animals brought from the Arctic region and is not allowed to harbor endangered species, Schubel said. "It's hard to have live animals from these environments, because of the difficulty in replicating the conditions," he said. Although not specific to the Polar Regions, five Magellanic penguins rescued from the beaches of Brazil are being featured in a newly constructed exhibit, to be completed by 2012.

The Aquarium's new Ocean Science Center gallery introduces a new technology-based exhibit dubbed "Science On a Sphere." The six-foot diameter spherical display combines new technology developed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which provided a \$1 million grant for its installation.

The multimedia experience offers informational graphics projected on the sphere, showing the impacts of pollution, climate change, sea level rise and coastal flooding, along with stories about maritime trade and the local San Pedro Bay ports.

The Aquarium also features 17 new screens throughout the facility, along with newly documented films about climate change in the Great Hall and Honda Theater. Visitors may observe real-time images from the Arctic and story lines involving up-to-the-minute news occurrences, such as the tsunami in Japan, Schubel said.

For more information, call 562/590-3100 or visit [www.aquariumofpacific.org](http://www.aquariumofpacific.org). ■

– STAFF WRITER SEAN BELK



Greg Bombard, president of Catalina Express, said the company has seen an uptick in passenger travel to Santa Catalina Island this year over 2010. The vessel service is celebrating its 30th Anniversary this year, offering passengers free rides on their birthdays. The company's fleet consists of eight high-speed vessels including four catamarans. The largest vessel in operation, the *Catalina Jet* pictured here, has the capacity to carry nearly 500 passengers across the channel. Catalina Express offers up to 30 round trips daily and operates from Long Beach, San Pedro and Dana Point. Below, people line up to board at the Long Beach terminal. (Photographs by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

includes Alaskan king crabs, northern anchovies and an interactive touch tank of moon jellies, Schubel said.

Jerry Schubel, the Aquarium's president and CEO, said the nonprofit entity has been able to gain financial support for the expansion and new exhibits, mainly because the Aquarium isn't just a place of entertainment to generate revenue, but has a goal of scientific research and teaching attendees about relevant environmental issues.

"We're not asking people for big gifts to a place where you come just to have fun. This Aquarium is very involved in environmental issues that are very important to Long Beach and all of Southern California and that affect all of us," he said. "We're quite confident that we're going to be able to pull this off."

This year, Schubel said attendance for the first quarter has been "unpredictable," with record good months and others that were down. But overall, general paid attendance is up close to 2 percent over last year and retail sales are up 5 percent year-to-date. Membership remains flat at about 33,000 member-households and more than 100,000 individual members.

"It's a very noisy signal, but I think the general trend is slightly up," he said. "With these two new wonderful exhibits . . . I think we're going to have a good summer unless things really fall apart."

### Queen Mary Searches For New Management Company

While Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts (DNC) quickly turned around sales revenue figures and hotel occupancy at the Queen Mary since taking over management in 2009, the historic vessel is now in search of a new management team after DNC cut ties with Save the Queen, LLC in April this year. The split-up was "an amicable business decision to separate," according to the ship's spokesperson Long Nguyen.

After replacing Hostmark Hospitality

Group, DNC helped to achieve its goals of rebranding the attraction with targeted marketing, renovations of the ship's 314 hotel staterooms, restaurants and meeting spaces.

Eddie Timmons, acting general manager of the ship, named by operator New York-based Garrison Investment Group, would not comment on the ship's current operations "until the new management team is in place."

### Cruise Lines, Catalina Express Continue To Offer 'Values'

One of the largest economic drivers out of the Long Beach Harbor's waterfront area is Carnival Cruise Lines, which generates tens of millions of dollars a year in total direct economic impact.

After Carnival canceled a handful of cruises this year due to an engine room fire that put the new Splendor cruise ship out of commission for nearly two months, Vance Gulliksen, Carnival spokesperson, said the cruise line is expecting relatively flat sales for West Coast passengers this summer compared to last year. "Carnival Cruise Lines expects to carry roughly the same amount of passengers on its West Coast cruises as in previous years," he said.

In addition to the 3,006-passenger Splendor, which offers seven-day cruises to the Mexican Riviera (currently Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas), Carnival Cruise Lines also operates the 2,052-passenger Carnival Paradise, which sails three- and four-day cruises to Baja, including three-day trips to Ensenada, also calling at Catalina Island. The two ships that dock out of the Port of Long Beach are expected to operate 150 voyages and carry 390,000 pas-



sengers this year, which is roughly the same as in 2010, according to Gulliksen.

What has kept sales activity steady, Gulliksen said, has been bargain rates. Although rates have been inching upward, they still remain quite low. Consumers can get the lowest rates by booking further in advance of the sailing date, he added. "In the current economic climate, consumers are still seeking vacations that offer great value such as a Carnival cruise," he said.

However, some nearby cruise lines were affected much heavier. Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise lines, which had ships servicing the Port of Los Angeles, both left the West Coast market entirely this year, due mainly to the relatively weak economy coupled with perceived violence in Mexico that affected demand for trips to that region, according to Chris Chase, the port's manager of business development.

Currently, the port's two remaining customers are Princess Cruises and Disney Cruise Line, which started sailing in January. Both cruises offer seasonal voyages to Alaska in the summer months. The Disney Wonder offers seven-night itineraries to the Mexican Riviera.

The Los Angeles port receives roughly 3 percent of its revenues from the cruise industry. Chase said that when a cruise line docks, it brings roughly \$1 million per day in economic impact to the region. Year-over-year, the port is forecasting a flat to



The 952-foot-long Carnival Splendor accommodates 3,006 people and has a staff of 1,150. It visits Baja California from Long Beach, stopping at Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas. The Carnival Paradise also sails from Long Beach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

downward slope in activity in 2011 that should continue for the next few years. This year, 146 cruise ship calls are expected, with passenger totals dropping from 731,952 last year to 615,000 this year.

"It's just a hard picture with the Southern California economy still struggling and the demand for the vacation dollar; obviously there's some pressure on that, and the perceived issues down in Mexico by the average consumer makes it a challenge that's for sure," Chase said.

To accommodate passengers, the Port of Los Angeles has spent roughly \$40 million on upgrading its World Cruise Center, with general improvements and upkeep, along with remodeling the center's Berth 93, including solar panels, state-of-the-art gangways and reconfiguring the parking lot for easier access. "We're not sitting still," Chase said. "We're actually doing physical improvements to make the experience better for the cruise passengers, and we're going to be using that as a selling point when we try to bring in new cruise lines."

Greg Bombard, president of Catalina Express, said a whole host of new promotions that kicked off this year to celebrate the 30th anniversary have boosted passenger trips to Santa Catalina Island. "It's pretty exciting," he said. "We're actually running numbers that are up a bit, so it looks good."

According to Elaine Vaughan, vice

president of marketing and sales for Catalina Express, one promotion in particular that has gained attention is the free ride offered to passengers on their birthday. The promotion runs through April 30, 2012, and the free trip is only offered on the person's actual birthday. People can claim their promotional pass by registering online at [www.catalinaexpress.com](http://www.catalinaexpress.com).

Just in the first month of the promotion, there were more than 1,000 people that traveled on their birthdays and 37,000 people that had registered online. During the first five months of the year, sales have increased by more than 10 percent. "We are seeing a big, big response," she said.

What's also helped increase the number of travelers has been the island's managing company launching new attractions and facility renovations. Upgrades from the Santa Catalina Island Company include a refurbished hotel, new restaurants, tours and a zip-line eco tour. New attractions this year include a new underwater SeaTrek and rock-climbing wall at the newly renovated Descanso Beach. "We're just one big bubbling bottle of champagne over here," Vaughan said. ■