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Despite Sandy, poll finds vacationers planning to go to Shore

February 20, 2013 | By David O'Reilly, Inquirer Staff Writer

Hurricane Sandy may have torn away houses and boardwalks and dumped a roller coaster into the ocean, but most of the people who traditionally visit the Jersey Shore say they will be back this summer.

"The summer tourist season seems surprisingly stable," said David Relawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, which released the finding Monday.

Nearly two-thirds of those polled in late January and early February said they expected to spend as much time at the Shore as they always have, and 13 percent said they thought they would spend more.

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That translates to 77 percent of regular Shore-goers saying they expected to spend at least as much time this year as last.

Relawsk acknowledged that the same data indicate that nearly a quarter will spend less time, which could mean a loss of revenue for business owners and for homeowners who rent their properties.

"The news here - what we thought interesting - is that nearly everybody is going who said they usually go," he said. "But 23 percent are planning shorter stays. I thought it would be worse than that."

Relawsk said that normally his poll does not collect data about Shore recreation, but it was prompted to do so because of Sandy, a 1,100-mile-wide storm whose eye and 80 m.p.h. winds made landfall near Brigantine on Oct. 29.

Results are from a statewide telephone poll of 796 adult New Jerseyans; the margin of error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

The "superstorm" caused extensive damage to Shore towns north of Atlantic City and coastal New York City. Eleven percent of those polled said they planned to visit Atlantic City and 10 percent said Seaside Heights.

On Friday, Seaside Heights, one of the most heavily damaged towns, began restoring its boardwalk, which borough officials hope to have in place by May. The municipality derives about 70 percent of revenues from tourism.

The other top destinations, according to those polled, were Wildwood, Long Beach Island, Point Pleasant, and Ocean City.

About 70 percent of those who normally stay a week said they planned to that long, while 20 percent planned shorter stays and most of the rest said they were unsure.

Only 2 percent of long-term visitors said they expected to skip the Shore completely.

A little more than half of the visitors who traditionally stay three days or less said they planned to do so this year. Twenty percent said they hoped to stay longer.

Nearly three out of 10 day-trippers also said they hoped to visit more often.

"Taken together, the evidence suggests the typical visitors will spend less time . . . but not by much," Rutgers-Eagleton said in a news statement.

To promote tourism post-Sandy, the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium has called off its annual "Top 10 Beaches" contest, which pits town vs. town for bragging rights.

Instead of voting online for their favorite spot, beachgoers will be invited to submit photos of Shore memories to www.njtoptenbeaches.org. The best will be used in a calendar celebrating the Shore.