

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

# Florida An Entertainment Tourist Mecca

By KRISTEN FIORE | Daily Sun Senior Writer

Many facets of Florida tourism are well established, but the state is gaining a reputation as a dynamic hub for lovers of the arts. In fact, as the industry grows, both tourists and entertainers are flocking to the Sunshine State for lively conventions, cruises, festivals and venues. Florida's flourishing entertainment scene has resulted in the opening of new state-of-the-art venues in the last five years, such as the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando and The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center in The Villages, and has created job opportunities for those looking to work in the entertainment industry.

"Because Florida is by far one of the most highly recognized states for entertainment and tourism, the job market is no

different," said Annamarie Sisson, a lecturer in the department of tourism, hospitality and event management at the University of Florida. "With visitor spending supporting nearly 1.5 million jobs, this represents about 17% of total employment. This equates to one out of every six jobs in the state."

Florida drew 126.1 million visitors from out of state in 2018, a record number for the eighth year in a row, according to Visit Florida.

"Whether for concerts, cruises or conventions, most people are coming early or staying longer to enjoy the endless entertainment Florida has to offer," Sisson said.

On the other side of the coin, entertainers themselves are attracted to Florida, too, according to Sean Bliznik, a professor of tourism, events and attractions at Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

"Florida continues to draw some of the biggest names

because we have the venues, and we have the local population to attend such events, coupled with travelers who come to Florida for these experiences," Bliznik said.

Sisson also noted Florida's venues as an attraction for performers.

"High-quality performing arts centers scattered throughout the state pull in top Broadway shows, while other performance venues bring in sensational musicians," Sisson said. "Due to the size of the state, performers often choose to tour multiple venues to reach wider audiences."

### Conventions and Cruises

Thousands come to Florida for work, but it's the entertainment that makes a business trip more fun.

Roughly 1.4 million people a year visit Orlando's Orange County Convention Center, and many of them extend their stay to enjoy Florida's ample entertainment options.



Submitted Photo

The Tortuga Music Festival is a three-day multistage music festival in Fort Lauderdale. It hosts big names in country, rock and roots music, and every year, some of the proceeds are donated to the Rock the Ocean Foundation for ocean conservation.

"I think most attendees want to take advantage of their time here and enjoy the entertainment outside of the convention or conference they're attending," Sisson said.

Of course, conventions can be entertaining, too. Take MegaCon Orlando, for example. The convention, which celebrated comics, cartoons, anime and other forms of entertainment, was held in May at the convention center and reported over 100,000 fans.

Florida's cruise industry also is responsible for a large chunk of tourism, since people have to travel to get to the ports.

In 2018, 16.8 million passengers cruised from Florida ports, up 4.4% from 2017, said Jessie Werner, vice president of public affairs with the Florida Ports Council.

Some of this increase may be due to the travel trend of themed cruises, in which travelers get to enjoy both a journey and a niche interest.

"We've seen a shift in the past decade where travelers want to invest in experiences rather than buying new things," Werner said. "Cruise lines continue to increase onboard experience offerings, and themed cruising taps into this

movement combining an experience with a relaxing vacation."

### Music and Lifestyle Festivals

Cruises leave from Florida for an entertaining time at sea, but plenty of entertainment can be found on land, too.

Artists and fans visit Florida to attend music festivals like Electric Daisy Carnival Orlando, the Okeechobee Music & Arts Festival, the Tortuga Music Festival in Fort Lauderdale and SunFest in West Palm Beach.

Electric Daisy Carnival is an electronic dance music festival held annually in both Las Vegas and Orlando.

"So, if you are an EDC fan, then Orlando is the destination specifically for this event," Bliznik said.

EDC Orlando has nearly doubled in size over the past four years, from attendance numbers to the size of the festival itself, according to an EDC Orlando spokesperson. In 2018, the Orlando event welcomed more than 110,000 attendees.

Those looking for a more traditional festival experience are attracted to the Okeechobee Music & Arts Festival, which typically generates between 30,000 to 35,000 attendees.

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The Tortuga Music Festival is a three-day multistage music festival. It hosts big names in country, rock and roots music, and every year, some of the proceeds are donated to the Rock the Ocean Foundation for ocean conservation. Over \$1.2 million has already been donated to the cause, with \$532,000 coming out of this year's festival, according to a press release.

SunFest, another music and art festival, usually attracts more than 275,000 visitors, according to the festival's official website. Headliners for this year's event in May included big names like OneRepublic, Papa Roach, Ludacris and Earth, Wind & Fire.

Last year, the festival reported people traveled from 49 states and 31 countries to attend.

Entertainment is a big part of Florida's lifestyle festivals like the Florida Strawberry Festival and Fantasy Fest as well.

The Florida Strawberry Festival, an 11-day celebration of the strawberry harvest in eastern Hillsborough County, typically draws in over 500,000 visitors from all over the world, according to the festival.

Visitors come to enjoy not only the strawberries, but the entertainment. Big-name acts like Willie Nelson have played sold-out shows at there.

Fantasy Fest, an annual 10-day adult party in Key West, brings in as many as 75,000 people, according to the festival's official website. People dress in bright colors and costumes for hours of drinking, parades, swimming and games.

"Fantasy Fest participants come from all over the world," said Nadene Grossman Orr, a spokeswoman for the event. "Some of them attend annually, others for a once in a lifetime bucket list experience."

Art Festivals

There's no shortage of film, theater and art festivals in Florida, and the state has a great reputation when it comes to the arts, according to Sisson.

"The art scene here is thriving," Sisson said. "From historical arts in St. Augustine, to Salvador Dali in St. Petersburg and all the way down to the mass murals in Miami, Florida boasts a unique and modern take on its art scene."

Specific events also can act as a draw. The Orlando Fringe is a two-week celebration of the arts in which 100% of ticket sales go back to the artists.

Between 8% to 12% of attendees at the Orlando Fringe festival come from out of state,



Submitted Photo

The Orlando Fringe festival is a two-week celebration of the arts. About 8% to 12% of attendees come from out of state.

according to Brian Sikorski, marketing coordinator for the event.

"We're tied to different groups throughout the world," Sikorski said. "We're one of the nation's oldest fringe festivals and people like to come because it's so large and so long-standing in the community."

This year, nearly 75,000 people attended the festival, according to a press release.

Art Basel is a world-leading

art show that takes place in Basel, Switzerland, as well as Hong Kong and Miami. It features art displays and artwork by over 4,000 artists, and includes paintings, sculptures, photography and digital art, according to organizers.

Miami's 2018 Art Basel event featured 268 premier galleries from 35 countries, organizers said.

Leading international museums like the Albertina Museum Vienna,

Albright-Knox Art Gallery in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and The Centre Pompidou in Paris were attracted to the show, and around 83,000 people attended.

The Central Florida Film Festival, which takes place in Mount Dora, hosts filmmakers from all over the world.

And Florida has a big market for independent films, said Brendon Rogers, the festival's executive director.

"Florida also has a tremendous variety of locations for filmmakers to take advantage of (cities, suburbs, forests and beaches) which adds production value to their pictures," Rogers said.

Venues

Big performing-arts venues attract big name acts, and Florida has multiple venues to offer touring entertainers.

Amalie Arena in Tampa hosts more than 150 events a year, ranking it among the top venues in North America, according to the venue's official website.

"We host over 500,000 people in our building across all other events that are not Tampa Bay Lightning games," said Angela Lanza, director of event marketing at Amalie Arena.

About 26% of Amalie Arena's patrons come from more than

300 miles away, said Lanza.

"Amalie Arena has a lot of great features that tours are looking for when booking a tour, and we have a great team to work with while they are here," she said.

Orlando's Dr. Phillips Center is one example of new performing arts venues popping up around the state.

During its 2017-18 season, 634,000 guests visited the center, and there was a \$3.2 million increase in operating revenues over last year, according to the venue's official website.

The Sharon, like the Dr. Phillips Center, also opened in 2014.

"Word gets around between artists' booking agents and they find a new home to route their

national tours in Florida when they are passing from North Florida to South Florida," said Elizabeth Constant, booking coordinator at The Sharon. "We have an excellent location to pick up travelling tours because we are in the middle of the state."

Florida is a mecca of entertainment options, according to Sisson.

"If visitors and locals look beyond the beaches and theme parks, Florida is home to wonderful entertainment that never fails," she said.

Senior writer Kristen Fiore can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5270, or kristen.fiore@thevillagesmedia.com.

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