

SEWE, Valentine's Day make a great couple for Charleston hospitality industry

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The final figures aren't in yet, but it's safe to say the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition opened Charleston's tourism season on a positive note this year.

SEWE officials said overall ticket sales seemed to be stronger than in 2014, and those in the hospitality industry said they noticed an uptick of business in the local hotels and restaurants, thanks in part to the event falling on the same weekend as Valentine's Day.

"This is very preliminary, but it looks like we were up about 15 percent in total sales over last year," said Jimmy Huggins, president and CEO of the annual wildlife event. He added that all of the VIP tickets were snapped up six weeks ago, the earliest-ever sellout for that program. Plus, day-of ticket booths seemed to be busier, he said.

Although it was a frigid weekend, the sunny skies were part of the reason the picture looked brighter. In the week leading up to SEWE a year ago, icy weather halted many travelers' plans to visit Charleston for the wildlife event.

"We had rain and ice and snow up and down the East Coast, and it really did affect us," Huggins said. "I'd rather have clear and cold than rainy and warm. Our attendees will put on warm clothes and go outside and walk around. But rain really would have hurt us."

For the hospitality industry, Valentine's Day and SEWE falling on the same weekend made for a perfect storm of visitor traffic.

"I felt that this past weekend and Saturday, specifically, was the most-demanded

weekend and day in the entire month of February, especially with Valentine's Day being on Saturday," said Dan Blumenstock, a local hotelier and chairman of the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. "I've heard from plenty of area restaurateurs and friends in the industry about how great and how busy it really was."

Jonathan Weitz, owner of The Vendue hotel, which houses the Rooftop Bar and the Drawing Room restaurants, said it was a "great weekend overall" for his businesses downtown.

"For the whole weekend, you could tell we had a fair amount of people in Charleston for SEWE, and the other half of our guests were there for a romantic weekend," he said. "The Vendue was sold out all weekend, we held a SEWE dinner Friday night that sold out, we were beyond capacity at the restaurant for Valentine's Day, and then our Sunday brunch was close to selling out."

Linn Lesesne, spokeswoman for Charming Inns, said the companies' four inns and two restaurants were "extremely busy" over the weekend as well.

"Kitchen 208 had a record day on Saturday," she added. "SEWE is a great start to the season for Charming Inns."

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