

## 1998 Lee County Visitor Profile

### *Executive Summary*

1. Tourism is Lee's number one industry. In 1998, tourists spent better than \$1.5 billion in the County and 1,802,572 visitors enjoyed the Lee Island Coast [**LIC**]. These visitation and expenditure levels again represent all time peaks for the industry.
2. **LIC's** European statistics reflect the moderation of the economic difficulties that effected our feeder markets on the Continent and elsewhere in Europe. European visitation reached the 215,473 mark (+1.7%). Most importantly, however, Lee's market share in key Northeastern and Midwestern markets showed steady growth (Northeast: +3.0%; Midwest: +2.3%).
3. The economic problems that started in Asia have reflected themselves in all of our markets. Traditional North American destinations (primarily Hawaii) have experienced sharp declines in the ranks of Asian visitors over the past year. In response, these affected destinations are marketing more strongly for the Lee Island Coast's traditional markets, heightening competition.
4. The softening of the dollar in recent months has created an advantage for **LIC** in its European markets. Additionally, European Currency Unification (ECU) has put additional pressure on the core currencies of the German mark and the British pound, making the dollar more attractive. It is important to note that for the foreign markets, **LIC's** draw lies in its unique product. That is the image which needs to be reinforced and promoted.
5. **LIC's** domestic markets, however, are likely to begin to experience the impacts of economic contractions which should last for four (4) quarters. Over this period, **LIC** will need to work harder to maintain its share of core U.S. markets.
6. The Nation's tourism industry has undergone significant transformations over the past five (5) years. Most of these changes are structural in nature and of a socio-economic, demographic, and competitive origin.

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7. After W.W. II, the U.S. experienced rapid population growth. The baby boom generation first impacted education, then housing and job markets. Today, baby-boomers are increasingly empty nesters, approaching early retirement. Importantly, this market segment is financially well-off, "youth-oriented," mobile, and focused on quality products/services. This consumer segment is busy and economically active, making traditional vacation planning more challenging.
8. Although two-thirds of **LIC's** visitors (65.9%) travel to the area as couples, the family market is again gaining prominence as the baby-boomers' children begin to become part of Lee's core customer markets.  
  
Couples have a greater interest in get-away vacations (3-5 nights) and are more likely to fly. Frequently, both adult members of a household are in the labor force.  
  
Competition for the important family market is intense and increasingly segmented. Economic and social forces have impacted family tourism as well. Female labor force participation and divergent school holiday schedules, alone, make family vacation planning complex. This market is far more family oriented. For this group, although travel is still a joint decision, children are becoming increasingly important input elements.
9. Typically, **LIC's** markets are upscale, and professional and technical in occupation. For most, the pressures of daily life leave little time to research multiple, alternative get-away/vacation options. In the industry, this is known as the "Time Poverty Paradox." Travelers seek single-source information/offers and destinations that provide packages, joining several vacation elements. These consumers demand quality, value for the money, and the timely delivery of the product as promised. Promotional focus must be on convenience.
10. As a result of these factors, the length of time visitors can spend in the County had declined dramatically. Since 1984, the length of stay has dropped by five nights (1984: 12.9 days; 1998: 6.9 days). Given the demographic trends of the Nation, this decline is likely to continue, albeit at a decreasing rate. For the industry, this represents a growing marketing challenge.
11. A significant underlying trend in all traveler groups is the desire to get control over their lives, reduce stress, and seek more fun and enjoyment. They seek a better quality of life. Business travelers, in particular, want to reduce their stress and the hassle of travel.

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- 12.** Lee's visitors are highly satisfied (99.0%) with their vacation experience in the County, with 95.8% recommending the destination to their friends, relatives, and acquaintances (1997: 96.2%).

Moreover, fully 88.9% of visitors plan to return (1997: 87.9%), with almost two of every three visitors (65.5%) intending to return next year (1997: 63.6%).

- 13.** The County attracts highly educated and upscale travelers. In this vein, fully 82.9% of visitors say they use a computer. Of these, 76.0% use on-line services and some 54.2% of these obtain travel information. Fully, 11.0% now buy travel services on-line.

- 14.** Although *LIC's* share of the couples market is increasing, the family market is again gaining prominence as the baby-boomers' children begin to become part of Lee's core customer markets.

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- 16.** The concurrent shrinkage of the "traditional" season is also a function of the above factors, accelerated by the increasing availability of affordable air transport. Southwest Florida International Airport in Lee County is the critical catalyst to the future growth of the industry.