

Sea of red putting tourism businesses in the black; BCS game filling rooms, buses

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By **Kaija Wilkinson**

PASCAGOULA, Mississippi -- The economic impact of Monday night's BCS national championship game between Alabama and LSU in New Orleans is spilling over into south Mississippi, according to area tourism officials.

At the end of the week, more than 1,000 room nights had been booked thanks in part to a promotion providing chartered bus rides to and from the big game with a two-night minimum hotel stay in south Mississippi.

Casinos and charter bus companies are getting in on the action too.

That includes local bus company **Vision Tours** of Ocean Springs. Because of the promotion, Vision is having what owner Jane Sutton describes as one of the busiest months, and busiest Mondays, of the year.

"Monday is probably our slowest day of the week, and to have everything going out on a Monday is tremendous," she said.

Add to that the Sugar Bowl, the Saturday Saints playoff game and Saints' momentum in general, and it's adding up to be a pretty good winter, she said.

As of late last week, a 10th Vision bus was filling to capacity with BCS-bound fans, she said.

Vision owns eight buses, she said, and contracts with other companies whenever demand is greater than that, Sutton said. Each bus holds 56 people, so that means 10 buses are set to carry 560 people to the game.

People who buy the packages are staying in hotels that book reservations through the Mississippi Hotel & Lodging Association, according to Executive Director Linda Hornsby.

Although many of the fans are staying in casino hotels, some have booked rooms in Jackson County such as at the Holiday Inn Express, Super 8 and Gulf Hills Resort, Hornsby said.



Joe Arguelles and Jonah Folks, of Vision Tours in Ocean Springs, make repairs to a tour bus Thursday afternoon. (The Mississippi Press/Cherie Ward)

"All the people wearing red will have a lot of tourism businesses operating in the black," she said.

Taryn Sammons, media relations manager with the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau, said that while the bureau has "no idea" precisely how much south Mississippi will rack up as a result of the game, it's likely substantial.

"The New Orleans folks are saying regionally it's a more than \$400 million economic impact," Sammons said. "New Orleans is 100 percent sold out, and people are staying in Baton Rouge and Mississippi.

"It's very positive for us and we're very excited."

Sammons said there are about 25 tour buses, including the Vision buses, chartered to take folks to and from the game.

Hornsby credits the quick thinking of the CVB with getting south Mississippi in on the action.

"They jumped on it as soon as the bowl bids went out," Hornsby said.

The CVB brought various players to the table in early December, including Hornsby and executives from the area's top ad agencies. Packages were put together and the agencies immediately flooded Alabama with radio spots.

Once the campaign was launched, the phones started ringing almost nonstop with people wanting packages, Hornsby said. "I can always tell when an ad has just run," she said.

Hornsby said 99 percent of the people staying on the Coast before heading to New Orleans are Crimson Tide fans.

Tourism officials are throwing in a little lagniappe with the hotel room-bus ride package, in the form of goody bags that could carry the economic ripple effect even further.

Just Thursday morning, Hornsby said, the association received some 500 pamphlets from Gulf Coast Gator Ranch and Airboat Swamp Tours in Moss Point.

Eva Philip, who helps run the Ranch, said she heard about the BSC packages on the news and figured it wouldn't hurt to drop off some materials.

"Most of them will start coming in Friday and Saturday, so we haven't seen anybody yet," Philip said Thursday afternoon. "But we're hoping to get a whole lot of business from this."

Also in line to win: Area restaurants for which the BCS fans will receive a coupon book, other local tourist attractions, and retailers such as the Gulfport Premium Outlets, for which the fans receive a VIP shopping pass.



Mississippi Gulf Coast also sees big business from BCS



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Paul Murphy / Eyewitness News

NEW ORLEANS -- The BCS title game is not only a major boost to the New Orleans tourism economy. The spill-over business also has the Mississippi Gulf Coast preparing for a busy weekend.

The coast ran advertisements across Alabama, reaching out to 'Bama fans heading to the Crescent City for the big match-up with LSU.

"One single event can have such a positive impact on a region," said Beth Carriere with the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Gulf Coast is offering special BCS packages, including discounted hotel rooms and round-trip bus transportation to the French Quarter and Superdome.

"We got together as soon as the last touchdown was made with the qualifying games and decided to act then to have an offer to the visitors," said Carriere.

Linda Hornsby from the Mississippi Hotel and Lodging Association said they expect to bring two-dozen charter buses full of people to New Orleans.

"Sunday and Monday night, ordinarily this time of the year would be very dismal," said Hornsby. "We're expecting thousands of room nights to be generated."

The Beau Rivage, the largest hotel on the coast, expects to be nearly full this weekend with most of its bookings BCS related.

"We love New Orleans and we have a great partnership with New Orleans," said hotel spokeswoman Mary Spain. "The fact that it's Alabama playing LSU in the southeast region, we're a nice central location."

While the Mississippi Gulf Coast is targeting mostly visitors from Alabama for the BCS, folks in the hospitality industry there are quick to tell you for this big game, it's not wise to choose between the Tigers and the Tide.

"One is to the east of us," said Carriere. "One is to the west. We're in the middle and I don't think that's a good place to be to pick a fight."

Gulf Coast leaders tell us there are still plenty of rooms available there for football fans who can't find lodging in the immediate New Orleans area.



Available hotel rooms hard to find in New Orleans



wwltv.com

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Paul Murphy / Eyewitness News

NEW ORLEANS -- With the Sugar Bowl, Saints-Lions playoff game and BCS in New Orleans all in less than a week, the odds of finding a hotel room in the city, if you haven't already booked one, are not good.

"We think there will be some rooms popping up, but for the most part, the city is going to be sold out, which is wonderful thing for our economy, obviously," said Mark Romig, CEO of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation.

Wonderful for the economy, but not so much for the last-minute traveler.

"We see a lot of people likely coming on Friday night for the playoff game, the game being late Saturday, so they will opt to maybe travel after the game on Saturday night or have found a place outside the city of New Orleans because the BCS for the most part really picks up traffic on that Saturday night," said Romig.

Since the downtown hotels are booked solid or close to it, suburban hotels like the Landmark in Metairie are filling up fast for the Saints playoff and big LSU-Alabama championship.

"We've already sold out for the BCS Championship and the days around that as well," said Landmark Hotel manager James Rolf. "We're not feeling it as much for the Sugar Bowl itself. We expect a lot of walk-ins for that."

The Mississippi Gulf Coast is also booking up for the BCS.

"We're working real hard and staying busy with the BCS coming in," said Beth Carrier, director of the Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Of course the Sugar Bowl, we're going to get some visitors from that."

The Gulf Coast Visitors Bureau has been running an ad across Alabama for the past two weeks, trying to attract bowl business from the Big Easy.

"It's not only a New Orleans impact, but it's a region-wide impact," said Romig. "So, we're going to be seeing people staying on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, we'll be seeing people staying in Baton Rouge and west of the city."

According to the NFL, the league reserved hotel rooms in advance for the Detroit Lions. They face the Saints Saturday night.

As for Lions fans, we're told they are already booking rooms in Baton Rouge.