

Visit Sanford Announces 2023 Visitor Impact for Lee County



County Spending Increases by 8.6 Percent to \$104.59 Million in 2023

[SANFORD, N.C.](#) (August 14, 2024) — Visitor spending continued to break records for North Carolina in 2023, and in Sanford as well, according to data released Tuesday by the [NC Department of Commerce](#).

Travel spending statewide rose 6.9 percent to \$35.6 billion in 2023 to set a record in visitor spending. That growth followed a record-breaking increase of 15 percent in 2022. Direct tourism employment also increased statewide by 4.8 percent to 227,000.

The story for visitor spending in Sanford is also record-breaking. Total visitor spending rose 8.6 percent to \$104.59 million in 2023, placing Lee County at the number 12 spot statewide for spending growth.

Visit Sanford Executive Director Wendy Bryan credits the community's vision to be a desirable destination, business partner efforts, and community partnerships with the increased visitation.

“The Tourism Development Authority Board has implemented a vision of strategic marketing and expanded visitor services to draw key audiences to Sanford and Lee County. We continue to see increased investment from visitors, and we are working to offer more opportunities to travelers and visitors,” Bryan said.

Key initiatives for Visit Sanford this year included opening a Welcome Center, working with the Dennis A. Wicker Civic and Conference Center at Central Carolina Community College to attract new and expanded meetings and events, supporting the Central Carolina Wedding Association to make Lee County the fastest growing wedding destination in the state, and working with Downtown Sanford to create key events and experiences.

Bryan said the support from Visit NC with public relations initiatives, marketing co-op offerings, and industry best practices is another key to the success of smaller communities like Sanford and Lee County.

“The new study underscores the importance of tourism to every county in North Carolina,” said Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit NC. “There’s a lot of competition for travelers’ time and money, and we owe our success to everything from the state’s scenic beauty and outdoor adventure to our mix of tradition and innovation and our welcoming spirit. Those qualities might be hard to measure, but we can follow the trail to a measurable impact on our workforce, our businesses and our tax base. We look forward to continued success.”

“We’re thrilled that visitor spending has reached a record \$35.6 billion and that the growth is spread across the spectrum of local economies,” said N.C. Commerce Secretary Machel Baker Saunders. “Scenic beauty, authentic experiences and graciousness are at the heart of what makes tourism a vital industry, one that’s anchored by our first-in-talent workforce. It’s a point of pride and honor that North Carolina ranks as the nation’s fifth most-visited state.”

Sanford TDA Board Chair Emalee McCracken said, "Sanford offers a myriad of opportunities for visitors and residents alike. From stunning outdoor spaces to immersive art experiences, we are truly a welcoming destination

The visitor spending study, commissioned by Visit NC and conducted by Tourism Economics, provides preliminary estimates of domestic and international traveler expenditures as well as employment, payroll income, and state and local tax revenues directly generated by these expenditures. The statistical model draws on detailed data from Visit NC as well as data derived from federal and state government sources, nationally known private and non-profit travel organizations, and other travel industry sources.

Key findings from the report:

- 2023 saw growth in visitor spending for both urban and rural counties with 98 of North Carolina's 100 counties seeing increases in spending compared with 2022. Orange, Wake, Camden and Warren were among the counties that led the state's 6.9 percent growth in visitor spending, which reached a record \$35.6 billion.
- Eight of the state's 100 counties had double-digit increases in visitor spending (Orange, Wake, Camden, Warren, Franklin, Durham, Halifax and Cabarrus).
- Growth in direct tourism employment was also seen among rural and urban counties with nearly 20 percent of counties seeing higher than average growth. Camden led all counties with a 10 percent increase. Other counties with top increases in tourism employment were Orange (up 9.8 percent), Cabarrus (up 9.3 percent), Forsyth (up 8.3 percent), Durham (up 8.1 percent) and Mecklenburg (up 8.0 percent).
- Mecklenburg received \$5.8 billion (up 9.6 percent) in traveler expenditures to lead all counties. Wake ranked second with \$3.3 billion (up 11.4 percent), followed by Buncombe (\$3.0 billion, up 3.0 percent), Dare (\$2.1 billion, up 8.8 percent), Guilford (\$1.7 billion, up 8.7 percent), Brunswick (\$1.2 billion, up 7.5 percent), Durham (\$1.1 billion, up 10.5 percent), New Hanover (\$1.1 billion, up 5.9 percent), Forsyth (\$1.1 billion, up 6.9 percent) and Moore (\$805 million, up 7.4 percent).
- Mecklenburg had the largest number of direct tourism employees (36,310), an increase of 8.0 percent from 2022. Four other counties had more than 10,000 direct tourism employees: Wake (25,984, up 5.7 percent), Buncombe (19,862, up 2.9 percent), Dare (12,564, up 4.4 percent) and Guilford (11,580, up 5.5 percent).

Full tables can be accessed at partners.visitnc.com/economic-impact-studies. Will go live as soon as release is posted Find more facts about

NC tourism facts:

- Total spending by domestic and international visitors in North Carolina reached \$35.6 billion in 2023. That sum represents a 6.9 percent increase over 2022 expenditures.
- Domestic travelers spent a record \$34.6 billion in 2023. Spending was up 6.8 percent from \$32.4 billion in 2022.
- International travelers spent \$997 million in 2023, up 9.5 percent from the previous year.
- Visitors to North Carolina generated nearly \$4.5 billion in federal, state and local taxes in 2023. The total represents a 5.8 percent increase from 2022.
- State tax receipts from visitor spending rose 5.6 percent to \$1.3 billion in 2023.

- Local tax receipts grew 5.4 percent to \$1.2 billion.
- Direct tourism employment in North Carolina increased 4.8 percent to 227,200.
- Direct tourism payroll increased 6.6 percent to nearly \$9.3 billion.
- Visitors spend more than \$97 million per day in North Carolina. That spending adds \$7.1 million per day to state and local tax revenues (about \$3.7 million in state taxes and \$3.4 million in local taxes).
- Each North Carolina household saved \$518 on average in state and local taxes as a direct result of visitor spending in the state. Savings per capita averaged \$239.
- North Carolina hosted approximately 43 million visitors in 2023.

· “It’s great to see increasing numbers of people continue to flock to North Carolina to see all we have to offer,” said Governor Roy Cooper. “Visitors are investing record amounts of money bolstering our booming tourism industry, and that brings good jobs and income to North Carolina businesses and families.”

· The preliminary findings from an annual study commissioned by [VisitNC](#), a unit of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), reflect the economic impact of tourism on local economies across the state.

About Visit North Carolina:

Visit North Carolina is part of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), a private nonprofit corporation that serves as North Carolina’s economic development organization. The EDPNC focuses on business and job recruitment, existing industry support, international trade, tourism and film marketing.

The mission of Visit NC is to unify and lead the state in positioning North Carolina as a preferred destination for leisure travel, group tours, meetings and conventions, sports events and film production. Each year, North Carolina welcomes about **43 million visitors** who spend nearly \$36 billion during their stay. The tourism industry employs more than 227,000 people and generates nearly \$2.6 billion in state and local tax revenues. For travel ideas and inspiration, go to [VisitNC.com](#).

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