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U.S.

# For a Few Destinations, Tourism Is Doing Better Than Ever

The big vacation is out. America is going camping (and boating and hiking and fishing) instead.

By [Gwynn Guilford](#)

Aug. 28, 2020 1:58 pm ET



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The pandemic pummeled tourist hubs across the country this summer as families shunned the usual vacation hot spots, canceling flights and scrapping plans for beach getaways. But for some rustic destinations within a day's drive of big U.S. cities, the coronavirus crisis unleashed a boom.

Garrett County, Md., suffered with the rest of the country's holiday hot spots when the state ordered nonessential businesses to close on March 23. That day, Steve Green laid off his entire staff at High Mountain Sports, an outdoor equipment store that caters to skiers in winter and, in the summer, hikers, bikers and boaters on nearby Deep Creek Lake. "I was having a hard time seeing a light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

Then, in late May, Maryland began relaxing the lockdown. "It was like on Memorial Day at 4 o'clock someone turned the light switch on—and it's been just nonstop since then," the 52-year-old said. His company, like many others in Garrett County, is on track for a better year than 2019, despite 2½ months of pandemic lockdowns.



Steve Green, the owner of an outdoor recreation equipment store in the Deep Creek Lake area, said kayak rentals have more than doubled through the end of July.

PHOTO: STEVE GREEN

“People are looking for a place they can go on vacation and feel relatively safe,” he said. The area is within a few hours’ drive of Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. The main recreation options involve the man-made lake, Allegheny Mountains and eight state parks nearby featuring activities that let families keep to themselves, such as kayaking, biking and hiking.

“There is probably no better way to social-distance than being on a boat,” said Mr. Green.

Similar stories are coming from other parklands and lesser-known vacation spots as families steer clear of airports, hotels and big beach resorts. On a national level, these shifts have led consumers to cut travel spending to just half what they spent last summer, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

Yet, in July, more people visited Fort Sumter National Park, in South Carolina, and Sleeping Bear Dunes and Pictured Rocks on the Michigan shore of Lake Michigan than any month since the National Park Service began tracking in 1979. Visits to Valley Forge, in Pennsylvania, and Maryland’s Assateague Island hit multidecade highs last month. State parks have reported similar surges.

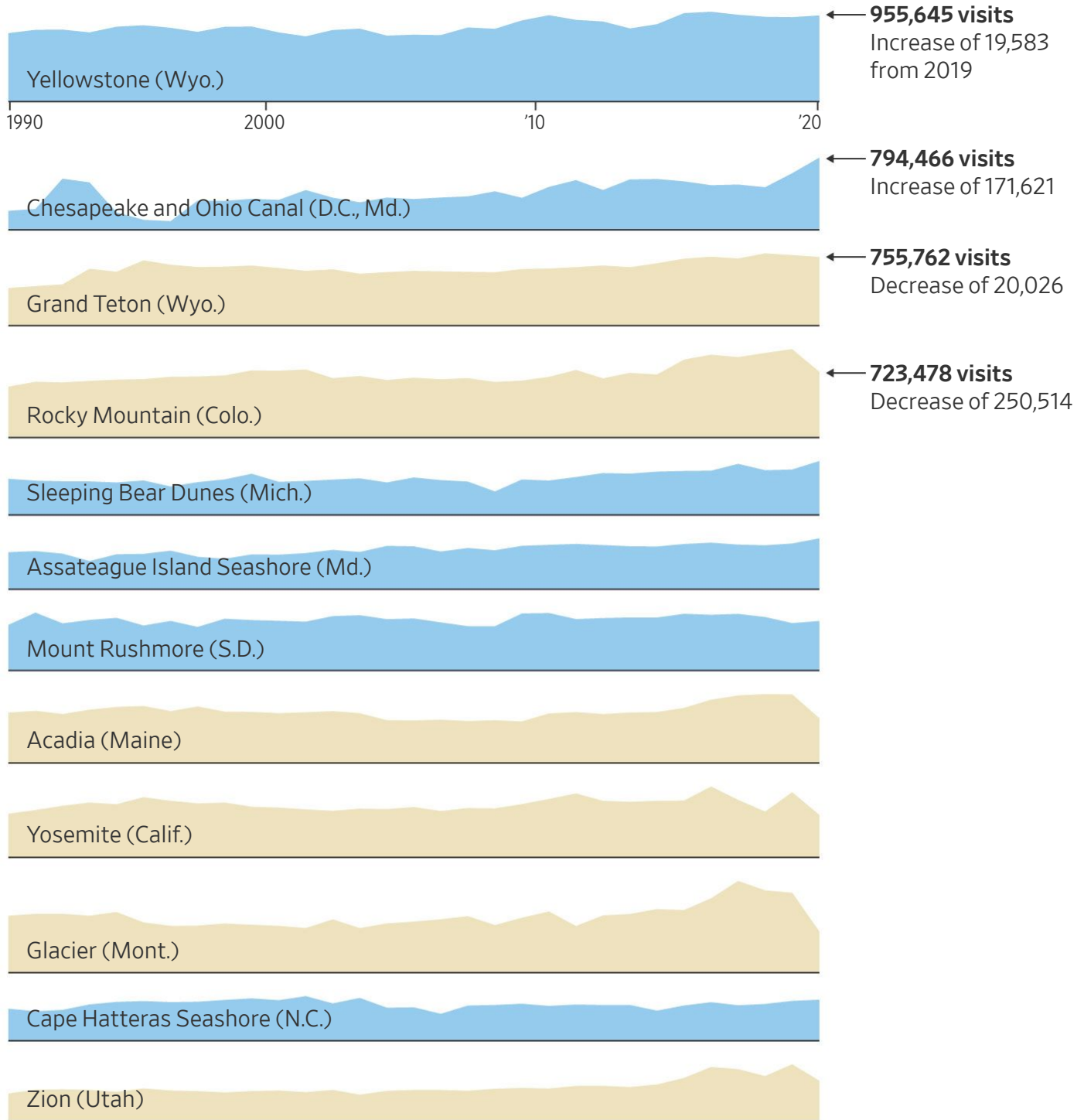
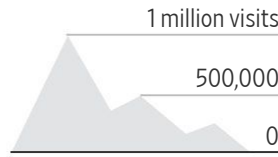
## New Favorites

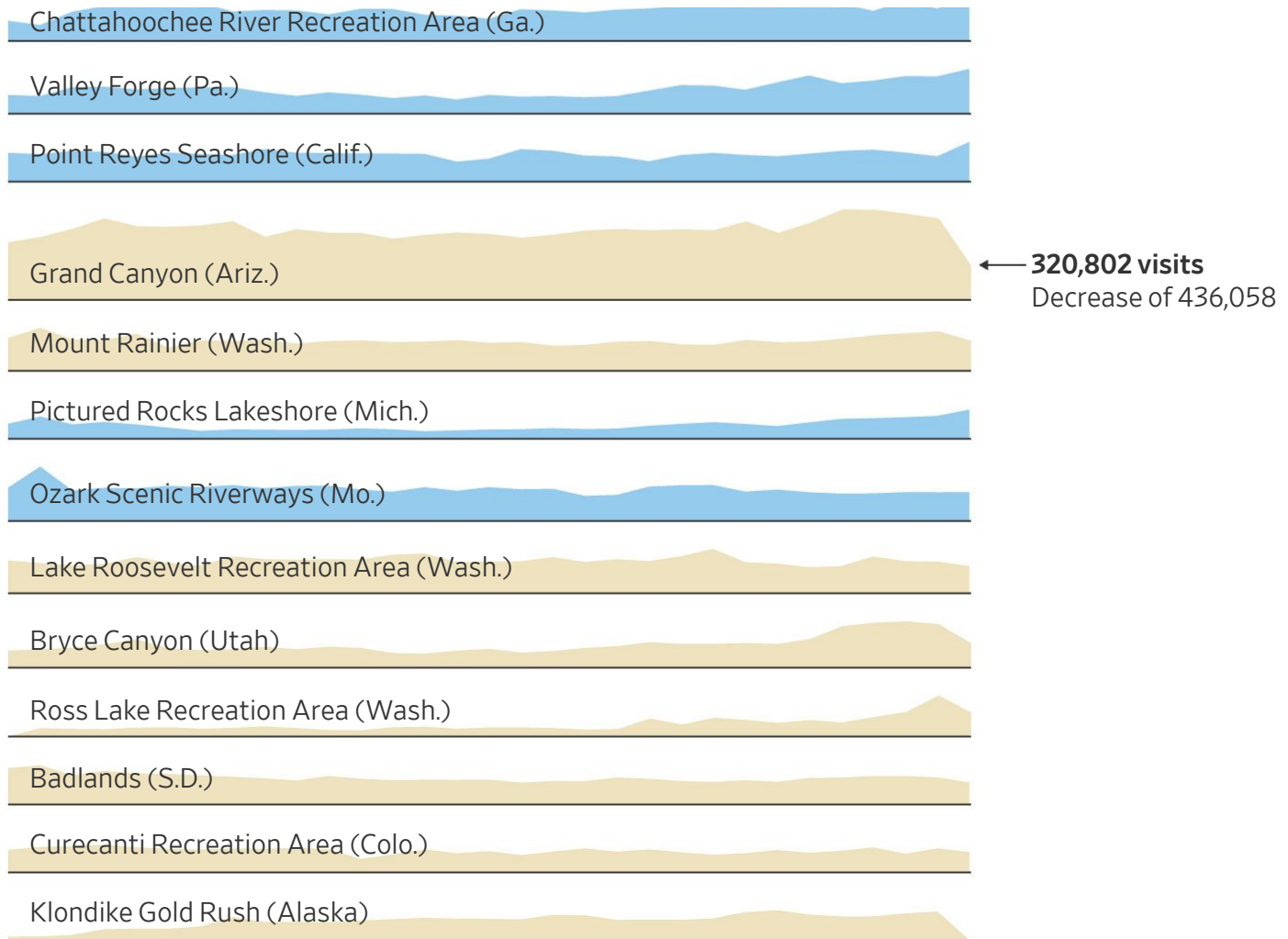
Some national parks that tend to get many July visitors had low turnouts this year, but July 2020 was a banner month for others. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal had more visitors in July than the Grand Canyon for the first time in over three decades.

### Recreational visits to national parks in July, ranked by July 2020 visits\*

Change in July visits from 2019 to 2020

■ Increased ■ Decreased





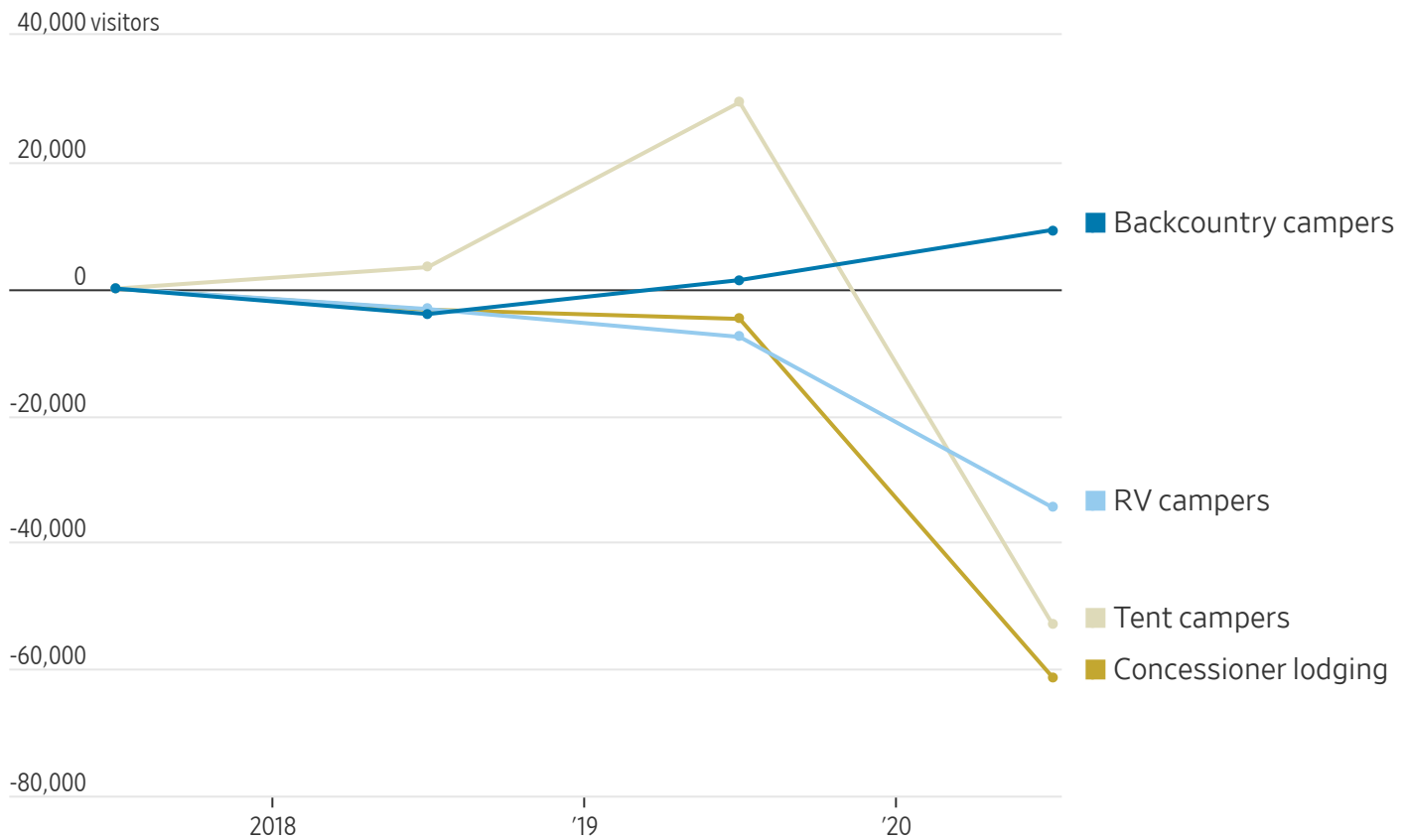
\*Among national parks, excluding national monuments and national parkways, with the most visitors in July 2019 and data available for July 2020

Source: National Park Service

Kara Dapena/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Camping is revving up at national parks around the country, despite limits on campsite operations. After 83 days of shutdown, Yosemite reopened on June 11 with capacity limits and all but two of its campsites closed. The California park reported 470,000 visitors last month, just two-thirds of the number in July 2019. However, backcountry campers—backpackers staying overnight at sites accessible only on foot—surged in June and July. Camper numbers also leapt last month at Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California, Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota and Arkansas’s Buffalo National River.

## Overnight visitors to Yosemite National Park in July, change from 2017

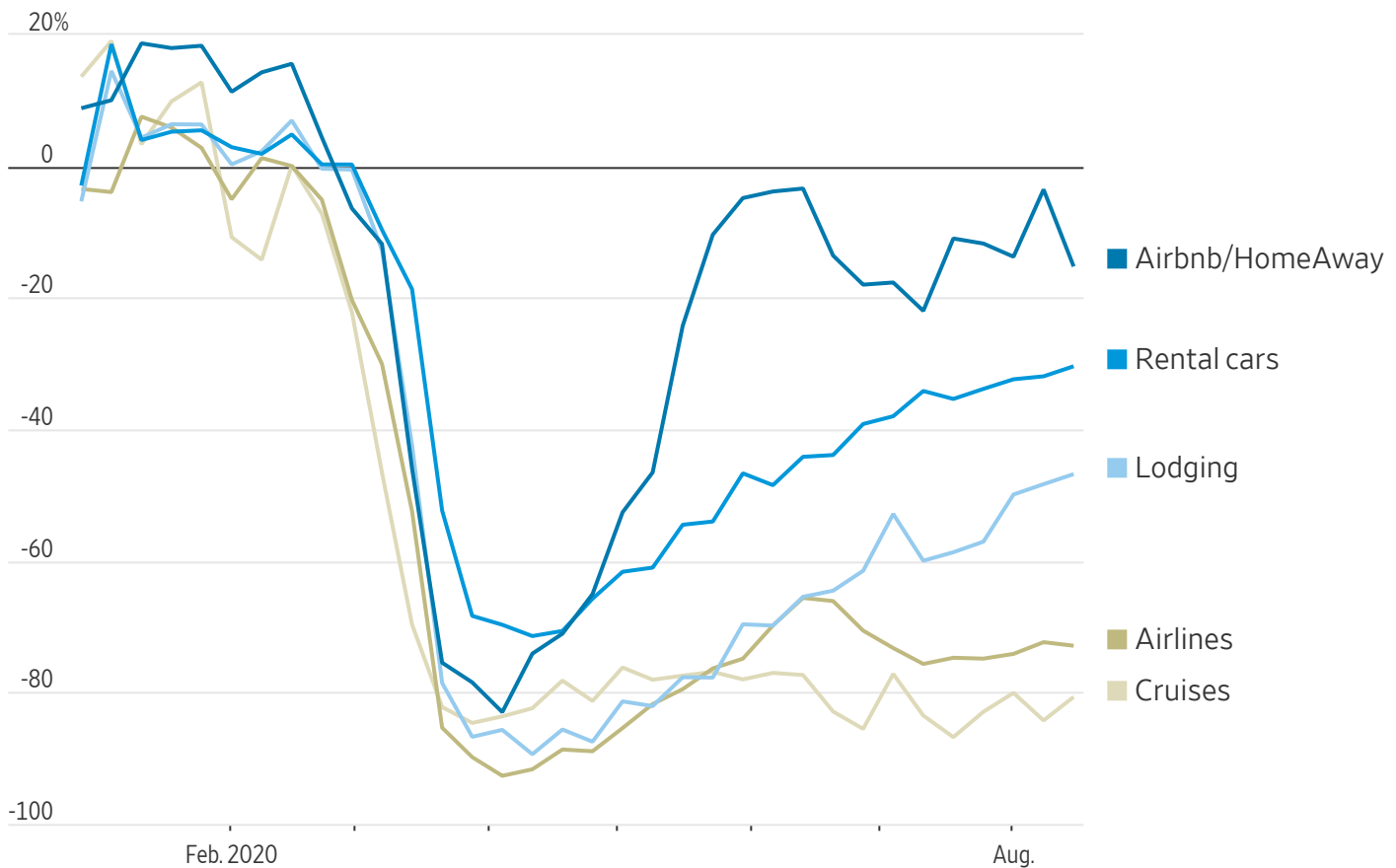


Note: 'Tent campers' refers to campers at car-accessible sites. 'Backcountry' refers to sites accessible only on foot.

Source: National Park Service

Nationally, spending on air travel during the week ending August 19 was down around 73% from the same week in 2019, according to Earnest Research, which tracks trends in credit- and debit-card purchases. That week, consumers were shelling out about half what they did last year on hotel stays. However, they spent just 15% less renting homes on Airbnb and HomeAway as they had the same week in 2019.

### Credit/debit card spending on travel vs. same week a year ago



Source: Earnest Research

Maryland's Garrett County comprises a constellation of tiny towns near the westernmost edge of the state. The county's 30,000 residents depend heavily on the 1.4 million visitors each year—who come typically for skiing in the winter or outdoor recreation in the summer—said the president of the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce, Nicole Christian. Tourists spend around \$315 million annually, supporting around 3,000 jobs, she said.

Though things looked bleak in mid-March, as the nation shut down, by April takeout orders and boating activity had begun picking up, largely because of second-home owners who had fled quarantine in the cities.

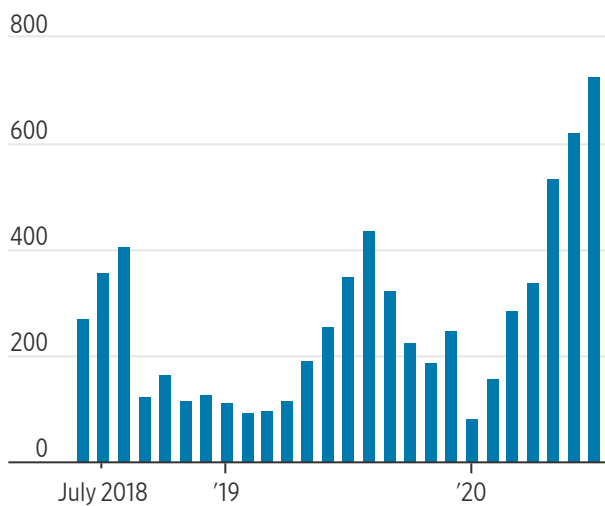


Meagan Till, general manager and partner of Dutch’s at Silver Tree restaurant, on the shores of Deep Creek Lake, said an influx of second-home owners boosted business unexpectedly in April and May.

PHOTO: MEAGAN TILL

The urban exodus buoyed the carryout business in April and May at Dutch’s at Silver Tree, a restaurant on the banks of Deep Creek Lake, said Meagan Till, 40 years old, the restaurant’s general manager and one of its partners. Gas sales for boats jumped in April and May at Silver Tree Marine, said owner Lauren McCann, 35. “Second-homeowners were using their boats more because most places were closed,” she said, adding that many bought takeaway meals to eat on their boats.

**Monthly total trail counts for Garrett County’s Fork Run Red Trail**



Note: Count data reflect hikers, trail runners, bikers but not vehicles. Groups who pass the counter side by side generate a single count, while users that go out and back on the same trail could produce two counts. Source: Garrett Trails, Trail Maintenance Committee

Foot traffic on a popular hiking trail surged nearly threefold during March, April, and May, according to data collected by infrared counters installed by the county's Trail Maintenance Committee. Hiker visits throughout the summer were between two and three times higher than the same period last year, said Evan Byrne, chair of the trails committee.

Jodi Refosco, 42, said her vacation-home rental company, Taylor-Made Deep Creek Vacations & Sales, went from fielding between 30 and 40 reservations daily to just one a day during the months under lockdown. As states eased their pandemic restrictions, it jumped to 140 a day in late May. Revenue is up 40% year to date, compared with 2019, despite the lengthy shutdown. To keep up, the company has hired 35 more employees, nearly one-fifth more than the head count projected before the pandemic.

One big reason for that increased demand is that with many workplaces and schools operating on a remote basis, families have much more flexible schedules. "Day of the week does not matter—we're getting Sunday to Wednesday, which normally wouldn't happen," said Ms. Refosco, who co-owns Taylor-Made with her husband and brother.



Joe and Jodi Refosco, co-owners of Taylor-Made Deep Creek Vacations & Sales, with their two children, take their boat out for a spin.

PHOTO: TAYLOR-MADE DEEP CREEK VACATIONS & SALES

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*How have your vacation plans changed this summer? Join the conversation below.*

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The pandemic also lengthened the usual summer season, as virtual learning freed up families to travel during the school year—in the first half of June and the second half of August. Reservations between June 1 and Labor Day are up 44% from the same period last year, said Ms. Refosco.

Not all businesses in Garrett County are thriving. Wedding cancellations have been a blow to some, hurting Dutch's side business in rehearsal dinners and catering. Around 15% of the staff at Wisp Resort are on furlough, said Lori Zaloga, the resort's marketing manager, though that's down from 84% in late March.

Demand for vacation homes is even holding up well into September, said Kristin Skeweris of Railey Vacations, which manages short-term rentals. The volume of requests for Wi-Fi connections suggests that many are taking advantage of the pandemic to work from a vacation home. "You do your work, then you can walk outside and it's vacation from 5 p.m. on," she said.

The perverse benefits of the pandemic might play out differently for Garrett County businesses as the weather cools. Mr. Green, of High Mountain Sports, worries that the same vacationing preferences that have more than doubled his kayak rentals could make the ski season rougher than usual. "How do we operate our ski-rental shop—which is normally pretty busy—with a lot of people in it?" he said. "My biggest concern now is how we get through this winter."

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore is on Lake Michigan. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it was on Lake Superior. (Corrected on Aug. 29)

*Appeared in the August 29, 2020, print edition as 'Where Tourism Is Still Booming.'*

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