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## Banner Year Sets Stage for Bright Future

**Duane Parrish**  
Director, SCPRT

The year 2014 will be written in the books as memorable and record-setting for South Carolina tourism, one that placed us on course for a promising future. An improving economy is restoring confidence in consumers, investors and developers enough to boost business in the state, and we've developed impressive promotional campaigns and forged new partnerships to keep South Carolina at the top of their minds.

Our most common economic indicators illustrate some of this success. RevPAR, or revenue

**Statewide Hotel RevPAR** -- An increase in statewide hotel occupancy of 4.9%, combined with a 6.3% increase in Average Daily Room Rates yielded an 11.5% increase in Hotel RevPAR statewide. RevPAR in the Orangeburg/Sumter, Walterboro/Hardeeville and North Myrtle Beach areas increased more than 20% during the month. Statewide RevPAR averages \$65.61 year-to-date.

**Admissions Tax** -- Overall Admissions Tax collections increased over 8% during October; however, Admissions Tax collections from golf decreased by 6.4% during the month.

**State Parks Revenue** -- State Parks Revenue increased significantly in October 2014 compared to the same month in the previous year. Revenue from cabin and campsite rentals increased slightly, and overall revenue increased 10% during Halloween weekend compared to the previous year.

per available room, through October is already 10 percent greater than 2013, and admissions tax collections for the first quarter of the fiscal year are up almost 5 percent. State parks continue to generate record levels of revenue, already collecting nearly 8 percent more in the first quarter of this fiscal year than this same period in 2013.

SCPRT has assumed the full operation of welcome centers and will establish high standards of hospitality for travelers the moment they pull off the highway. Work can already be seen at the Landrum Welcome Center on I-26 eastbound at our border with North Carolina.

Following an award-winning BBQ Trail campaign in 2013, we launched the new DiSCover South Carolina tourism campaign to draw more attention to extraordinary yet undiscovered destinations in the state.

We received the attention of The Golf Channel, which filmed the 22<sup>nd</sup> season of its most popular series "The Big Break" on four major Myrtle Beach golf courses, and broadcast the episodes on primetime television this fall.

We have tracked more than a half billion dollars in new investments in South Carolina, including new hotels in almost every major city, and new or expanded attractions like the \$170 million Project Jackson in North Augusta and \$50 million in improvements at Carowinds, including the new giga coaster Fury.

And finally, the reauthorization of Brand USA and the governor's recent trip to India, in which I participated, are opening new international markets

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## Airport Deplanements

Deplanements for January-October 2014 were up 5.1% compared to the same period in 2013. Deplanements for the full calendar year 2013 were up 6.4% compared to 2012.

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## Occupancy Forecasts

Smith Travel Research forecasts slight increases in occupancy statewide in January and February, with a slight decline in occupancy for March 2015.

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## State Parks Start the New Year Right With First Day Hikes

More than 30 state parks in South Carolina will offer free ranger-guided hikes, walks and special events on Thursday, Jan. 1, to help launch the new year (and to get resolutions off to a good start.) The **First Day Hikes** are mostly easy to moderate walks along beaches and lakes, in forests or on historic trails, to help visitors learn more about the cultural and natural heritage of South Carolina and to get in some holiday exercise.

While most hikes are suitable for all ages, one of the hikes at Table Rock State Park in Pickens is a strenuous 7-mile climb to the top of the mountain and is suitable for visitors who are at least 12 years old. Devils Fork State Park in Salem is offering a 1<sup>st</sup> Day 5K run along with its regular 2-mile hike along a nature trail. And Sadlers Creek State Park in Anderson is hosting a Deer Dip, inviting people to take a dip in the winter waters of Lake Hartwell, much like the Polar Plunges found in northern states.

"Traditionally, New Year's Day is a time to recharge and restart, and we're happy to offer ideal settings for people to do that," said Duane Parrish, Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism.

"The trails and pathways in state parks are some of the most naturally scenic and historically significant in the state. Inspiring and re-affirming, they set the stage for enriching experiences in the South Carolina outdoors."

For a complete list of parks hosting First Day hikes, click [here](#). Additional information about state parks can be found at [www.SouthCarolinaParks.com](http://www.SouthCarolinaParks.com).



in which South Carolina can appear, demonstrate its vacation appeal and lure more travelers.

We expect to carry this success beyond 2014 and continue improving the economy and quality of life in South Carolina.

The Park Service's First Day Hikes are part of a national movement by the America's State Parks program to get more people out into the great outdoors on New Year's Day and to rediscover the beauty and significance of their natural heritage.

## Governor's Conference Accepting Award Nominations

**Deadline Jan. 16, 2015**

The Governor's Conference is currently accepting nominations for its annual awards program to recognize outstanding, measurable achievements in tourism marketing and promotion. The Governor's Cup is the industry's most prestigious honor and the Charles A. Bundy Award recognizes outstanding local or regional programs in rural areas in South Carolina, particularly those that involve placing development projects in those areas.

The awards program is an ideal opportunity for DMOs, attractions and campaigns to demonstrate how their efforts lead the way in promoting South Carolina as a tourism destination.

Nomination forms can be found at this [link](#), and the deadline to nominate is Friday, Jan. 16, 2015.

Winners will be recognized at the conference's award luncheon on Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2015.

Winners also will receive:

- One (1) reserved table at the luncheon to include Five (5) guests complimentary
- Recognition in "Tourism Today" - SCPRT's e-newsletter
- Recognition in press releases issued statewide and to media outlets in your regional area
- Online Co-op advertising benefits package with a retail value up to \$1,500, customized based on the winner's marketing objective
- One (1) complimentary registration at the 2016 Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel
- Permission to use award's name in promotions for one full year

For more information, contact Jenny Waller at [jwaller@scprt.com](mailto:jwaller@scprt.com).

*The 2015 Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel will be held February 9-11 at the Embassy Suites at Kingston Plantation Resort in Myrtle Beach. For more information about the conference, visit the [website](#).*

## Winners Selected in State Parks Photo Contest - Fall Season

Three winners were selected for the second quarter of the State Park Service's "Making Memories" photo contest, an effort that invites people to visit state parks, take photos of their memories and submit them for prizes.

The winners for the fall season are Brian Matthew Fox of Blythewood in the wildlife category for his photo of an alligator at Woods Bay State Park; Michelle Lupton of Columbia in the landscape category for her photo of a shooting star over the lake at Oconee State Park, and Laura Clay Ballard of Myrtle Beach in the people category for her photo of horseback riding at

## Myrtle Beach State Park.

Each winner received a prize package valued at \$200, including a \$100 gift certificate to Mast General Store for a pair of Oboz hiking shoes, a State Park Service Park Passport Plus and an Official Guide to South Carolina State Parks. Each winner also automatically enters into the competition for the grand prize - an ultimate outdoor adventure package worth \$1,000.

The Park Service is currently accepting photo submissions for the third quarter or winter season, the deadline for which is Feb. 28, 2015. Instructions on how to submit photography for the contest can be found at [www.SCMakingMemories.com](http://www.SCMakingMemories.com).

## TODS Signage Helps Strawberry Farm in Hopkins

Cottle Strawberry Farm has enjoyed a steady stream of visitors at its property in Hopkins for many years, but its manager was pleased to notice an uptick in business in 2014 after Tourist Oriented Directional Signage (TODS) was installed nearby on busy U.S. 378.

Farm Manager Jennifer Jordan said "It's fun watching people come talk about the sign. They say 'I saw that sign and here I am!' And we gain a customer. They went off the beaten path when they ordinarily might not have done that."

The 13.5-acre farm grows and produces only strawberries, and welcomes visitors to pick-their-own during the high harvest season of April and May. The farm also accepts visitors daily, offers tours by appointment and sells strawberry products.

Jordan said many of the new customers turning onto Trotter Road to visit their farm are new transfers at military bases who are discovering Columbia's attractions, and the TODS signage caught their attention. Other new customers are people who regularly travel U.S. 378 but have not made time to visit the strawberry farm. Jordan thinks the TODS signage "added a little legitimacy" about their business for those visitors.

Cottle's new sign was installed under the TODS program housed at the South Carolina Department of Transportation and administered cooperatively by the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism (SCPRT) and the South Carolina Department of Agriculture (SCDA.)

The program was developed by the state legislature in 2012 to help South Carolinians and tourists find authentic experiences, and to drive traffic and business to rural destinations.

To be eligible for TODS signage, attractions must meet certain tourism and agri-tourism criteria, including being located in a rural area, being easily accessible from a paved rural highway or the state highway system, being



open to the public and staffed on a regular basis, and offering unique, local and rural tourism or agricultural experiences.

Having met all criteria, Cottle Farms welcomed the new sign in late April 2014. It was just in time for the last month of the high harvest as well as the beginning of tourist season. "It has definitely raised awareness," Jordan said.

The next deadline for TODS applications is April 30, 2015. For a complete list of regulations, visit [www.scdot.org/doing/agritourism.aspx](http://www.scdot.org/doing/agritourism.aspx).

Lakefront villa at Devils Fork State Park

## State Parks Extend Reservation Window to 13 Months

Effective January 13, 2015, South Carolina's State Parks will begin to accept reservations up to 13 months in advance instead of the 11 months currently in place. This means that, for the first time, the public no longer has to wait a month to reserve accommodations for preferred dates in the following year. If a visitor wants to visit a state park on the Fourth of July in 2016, for example, they can make the reservation as early as June 4, 2015.

"This is about customer service," said Duane Parrish, Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism. "We're capturing that energy and spontaneity people have when they visit a park and say 'Wow, we had a great time. Let's do this again next year.' Now they'll be able to make plans immediately for the following year without having to wait a month.

"We anticipate it being very popular, especially among people who plan annual events and reunions," he added.

Under the new reservation system, the maximum period for advance reservations will be 13 months prior to the date of arrival, and the minimum period for an advanced reservation for campsites will be one day prior, and for lodging, three days prior.

State Parks will be letting people know about the changes in reservation policy in several ways. In the parks themselves, there will be signage announcing the changes and when they go into effect. The park service will also be reaching out to inform previous users through email prior to January 13. Finally, SC State Parks will use its extensive social media system and website to spread the word and remind the public of important upcoming holidays and special dates.

To learn more about the new system and to keep updated on other developments in your state parks, go to [www.SouthCarolinaParks.com](http://www.SouthCarolinaParks.com).

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