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THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S TRUSTED VOICE

DRIVE-MARKET BRIGHT SPOTS



For the hotel industry at large, 2020 was the worst year on record. But some properties, far from urban centers, were among the rare winners.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

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PHOTO BY TONY FULLER

AFTER CANADA BANS CRUISE CALLS IN 2021

With Alaska season on the ropes, lines challenged on cabotage law

By Johanna Jainchill

Alaska's three-member congressional delegation responded to Canada's Feb. 4 decision to extend its cruise ban into 2022 by calling it "unacceptable" and saying they would explore "all potential avenues, including changing existing laws, to ensure the cruise industry in Alaska resumes operations as soon as it is safe."

It was assumed that Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Rep. Don Young were referring to the Passenger Vessel Services Act of 1886

(PVSA), which requires foreign-flagged ships — which almost all large cruise vessels are — to stop in at least one foreign port when sailing between two U.S. destinations, such as Seattle and Alaska. It's why so many Alaska cruises start or stop in Vancouver or Victoria, British Columbia. If they didn't, they'd be in violation of this 19th-century cabotage legislation that was passed to protect U.S. shipbuilders and operators.

Alaska lawmakers were not alone in raising the possibility of changing or waiving laws to enable the industry to operate in Alaska waters this summer. Cruise and travel associations, including CLIA and the Alaska Travel Industry Association, also suggested they would seek a temporary waiver to the PVSA for the

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Hornblower is on a buying spree. Its latest: A bid for troubled ShoreTrips

By Jeri Clausing

The Hornblower Group's bid to buy the troubled cruise shore excursion seller ShoreTrips is just the latest in a series of moves by the company to snap up pandemic-ravaged companies and position itself as a leader in the cruise-related tour operator space.

Hornblower, the parent of the American Queen Steamboat Co. and Victory Cruise Lines as well as a number of day-and dinner-cruise companies, last fall purchased Shore Excursions of America, which had been the exclusive provider of tours for its domestic river cruises.

Last month, it purchased the U.K.-

based cruise tour specialist Cruising Excursions.

And late last year, it entered a contract to run Puerto Rico's ferry system, a move that American Queen CEO John Waggoner indicated was intended to help establish more excursion options for the many cruise ships that call at the port there.

Waggoner last year told Travel Weekly the company had an infusion of private equity and was also looking in the traditional tour operator space for companies that might be ready to get out of the travel space.

"There are some folks for whom this has been devastating," he said in a December

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ON THE RECORD

Marriott sales and marketing exec Julius Robinson on what travelers want now. **2**

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DESTINATION: CARIBBEAN


Island life slowed last year, but in the BVI, resorts were busy with revamps. **12**

MARK PESTRONK

Yes, agency owners can require staff to get vaccinated before coming to the office. **14**

COVER STORY

DRIVE-MARKET — — BRIGHT SPOTS



For the hotel industry at large, 2020 was the worst year on record. But these off-the-beaten-path properties, which are close to urban areas but celebrate the great outdoors, were some of the rare winners.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

For most in the U.S. hospitality and tourism sectors, 2020 was a year to forget.

But for some uniquely positioned properties and destinations, it turned out to be one of their best years ever.

"June, surprisingly, was almost a normal month for us, and we have had record-setting month after record-setting month since July," said Ben Wilder, tourism development manager for the Haywood County Tourism Development Authority.

Located in western North Carolina, Haywood County has seen visitation surge throughout the Covid-19 crisis, as domestic vacationers seek out drive-to destinations that offer opportunities to social distance and explore the great outdoors. A portion of the county is in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a hot spot for scenic hiking, fishing, skiing and other activities.

According to Wilder, an outsize number of the county's recent visitors have hailed from the East Coast, including markets like New York and Washington, with many travelers showing a strong preference for stand-alone, home-like accommodations.

"Many of these people have been working remotely

and have been looking for a break," added Wilder. "We have not had a cabin or Vrbo-type of rental available for some time now."

The North Carolina Smokies are no outlier — other destinations have found it easy to lure U.S. travelers looking for a temporary escape from the stressors of pandemic-era life.

In rural Farmington in Fayette County, Pa., the sprawling, 2,000-acre resort Nemaocolin has similarly enjoyed a boom in business. Although the property opted to temporarily take some guestrooms offline to avoid crowding — going from 323 keys to around 214 — Nemaocolin enjoyed what Chris Baran, the resort's vice president of sales and marketing, deemed "one of its best years, occupancy-wise."

"Nemaocolin has been here since 1987, and it's always had a very, very strong drive market. We saw that drive market really expand in 2020 beyond the typical two to four hours to markets six to eight hours away," said Baran, citing an uptick in guests driving in from as far afield as

Charlotte and Chicago.

Baran credited the four-season resort's appeal in part to its "safe, oasis-like isolation" as well as its vast array of outdoor activities, including dog-sledding, skiing, archery, fly-fishing, shooting instruction, horseback riding and more.

Those elements also captured the attention of the producers of ABC's reality TV series "The Bachelor," who selected Nemaocolin to serve as the setting for their 25th season, filmed this past fall. The dating competition show committed to a full buyout of the property from mid-September through late November, creating a quarantine "bubble" for its cast — including its star, bachelor Matt James — and crew.

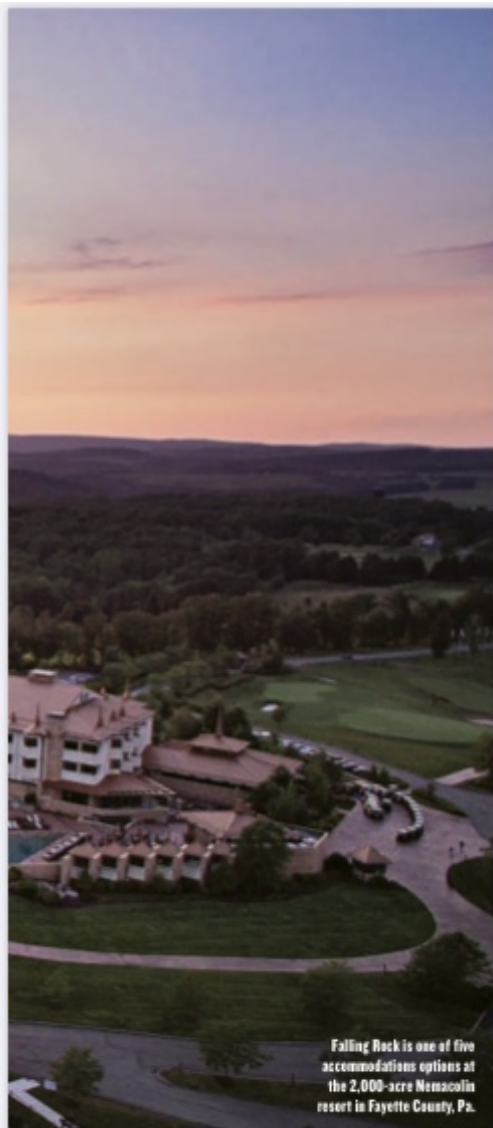
The season premiered on Jan. 4 and will run through mid-March.

"This was, obviously, a double win for us," Baran said. "Not only did it help us keep our staff fully employed and reenergized in our shoulder season, but it's also, basically, a 10-week, nationwide infomercial, giving us the ability to showcase our resort from coast to coast every Monday for two hours."

It wasn't the property's first experience with "The Bachelor" franchise. In 2016, Nemaocolin was featured as part of a single episode, which Baran said resulted in an immediate booking of 5,000 room nights.

"This time, they filmed all 32 dates on property," said Baran. "So we're expecting a pretty big bookings surge."

Like Nemaocolin, boutique player Wylder Hotels has similarly benefited from a more off-the-beaten-path



Falling Rock is one of five accommodations options at the 2,000-acre Nemacolin resort in Fayette County, Pa.



1) A yurt accommodation at Wylder Hope Valley in California's Sierra Nevada. 2) A cabin interior at Wylder Hope Valley. 3) Horseback riding will be among the activities offered at the Canyon Madness Ranch resort in New Mexico. 4) A family hiking in North Carolina's Haywood County, which has enjoyed a surge in visits during the pandemic.

footprint.

The group's Wylder Tilghman Island, a 9-acre, waterfront resort on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, sold out every weekend through the summer and fall, reported John Flannigan, Wylder Hotels founder and CEO.

"It's a little island, with only around 800 people, so I think people feel safe there," said Flannigan, adding that the property has proven quite popular with New Yorkers, in particular.

Wylder Hotels' Wylder Hope Valley offshoot, which opened this past June in California's Sierra Nevada, has also sold out consistently since its debut. Offering guests access to on-site hiking, mountain biking and snowshoeing, the property has also generated buzz with its diverse selection of socially distanced accommodations, which span everything from stand-alone cabins and yurts to a repurposed, vintage Spartan trailer.

"The majority of the clientele is from the Bay Area, Sacramento, Reno and Northern California," said Flannigan. "When we opened, we got a lot of folks who maybe were planning to go to Cabo or Hawaii but obviously chose to do something closer to home. I think we got a lot of new customers who just weren't originally thinking about a mountain resort four hours from their house, but then they got there, they realized, 'Oh, this is rad.'"

That sense of local discovery has similarly boosted business for boutique player Foster Supply Hospitality, which operates five independent hotels as well as several restaurants throughout the Catskills. Led by co-founders Sims Foster and Kirsten Harlow Foster, the group opened its

first concept, the 14-room Arnold House, in Livingston Manor, N.Y., in 2014.

"This past year, we were very happy to see a lot of our regulars, but we also saw a lot of new faces," said Sims Foster. "I definitely think there were some people that traded a vacation overseas to come to the Catskills, and now, hopefully, we'll continue to be in their travel arsenal."

Although the loss of event business was a setback for Foster Supply Hospitality, strong leisure travel demand has helped to counter that impact, with the company reporting sold-out weekends across its portfolio from summer through fall as well as an increase in both midweek bookings and longer stays.

"We did see a change in patterns," Foster said. "Typically, two-night stays are the majority of our bookings. But we were seeing more and more people staying three, four, five nights."

Meanwhile, Dr. Dennis Law, a retired surgeon and hospitality entrepreneur, predicts that some pandemic-era shifts — most notably, a desire to escape crowded cities and get back in touch with Mother Nature — will linger long after the threat of Covid-19 is mitigated.

"Once you get used to not being in a city, staying at five-star city hotels and shopping at the Neiman Marcus next door, it opens you up to a new kind of luxury," Law said. "There's certainly a luxury around being able to ride horses and rock climb and engage in firearm sports without anyone else around. It's a type of enjoyment and freedom that you won't find staying at the Ritz-Carlton in Chicago."

Law is preparing to open Canyon Madness Ranch, a

14,000-acre resort in remote northeastern New Mexico, located roughly two hours from Santa Fe and three-and-a-half hours from the state's largest airport, Albuquerque.

Scheduled to open in April, the ranch will offer a variety of equestrian activities, sports shooting, archery, hiking, river kayaking, fishing, all-terrain-vehicle rides and rock climbing. The property's Teepee Lodge will house just eight suites, with initial opening rates starting at around \$3,500 per person, per week, inclusive of activities, food, beer, wine and sake.

"Our inventory and number of guests is low, which allows us to provide much more personal care and attention," Law said.

Indeed, being both small and situated in a rural market has appeared to be something of a winning mix throughout the pandemic. For Foster Supply Hospitality, the model has proven especially successful, and the group is planning to expand with two new hotels later this year, including a property in Beach Wood, Pa., this spring and another opening in Neversink, N.Y., in late winter 2021.

"There are people in the development world who have always stuck their noses up at anything less than a hundred keys," Foster said. "Their philosophy always was, you can't make money off of anything that small. But I think that's going to change. The average daily rates are going to stay high at rural, full-service, small boutique hotels, and I do wonder if more institutional hospitality investors will start taking a closer look at some of these projects that they may have automatically passed on before because it wasn't, say, 300 keys on 50th and Lex" in New York.