

New study looks at who visits North Coast

Traffic, lodging costs are concerns

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

When international travelers come to the North Coast, they are enamored with the nature that surrounds them and the Oregonians they meet. But a few more signs telling them how to get around wouldn't hurt.

The observations are a part of recent study by Travel Oregon and the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement that looks at who visits the North Coast and what they like to do while they are here.

About 750 visitors from Astoria to Pacific City were surveyed in August in cities and state parks about what they felt were the region's greatest assets and weaknesses.

The information is aimed to inform tourism leaders on

how to make tourism sustainable environmentally and economically through a multi-year rural tourism studio program.

"It gives us the opportunity to understand who is there and what they value there," said Linea Gagliano, Travel Oregon communications director.

In many ways, the study shows what one would expect. About half of the visitors reported being from outside of Oregon but from the United States, with about another 30 percent coming from Portland — but almost all of them are coming for leisure.

About 80 percent of visitors come for entertainment, including restaurants, shops and breweries. About 70 percent of people are then interested in getting active with land-based activities like hiking and about 60 percent in water-based activities like beach walks. Only about 27 percent reported dabbling in arts and culture.

The ocean and general natural beauty was predictably the biggest visitor draw. One of the region's greatest assets is its "vibe," as many commented on the area's ability to "offer them a calm, quiet, and relaxing escape from their busy lives."

While about 75 percent reported having a pleasurable time on the North Coast, the study also illuminated constraints that, if left unaddressed, could affect the visitor experience. About a quarter of participants said they anticipate not returning, and in varying degrees cited issues such as too much traffic, a lack of parking, crowds and high costs of lodging as reasons why.

Good hosts

Outdoor recreation continues to be one of the fastest-growing travel markets in the United States. On the Oregon Coast, outdoor recreation accounted for about 10 percent of all visitor spending

in 2017, amounting to about \$200 million.

Accommodating the outdoor recreation market not only has room for growth, but also means attracting the type of visitor the destination marketing organization is looking for — someone who tends to stay multiple nights and spends more when they are here, Gagliano said.

While the North Coast is known for outdoor opportunities, and the report found that visitors enjoy the outdoor experience, signs and infrastructure could improve.

Despite having about half of respondents surveyed in state parks, only 7 percent reported camping. Cycling, one of Oregon's fastest-growing outdoor recreation industries, didn't make the list at all.

The findings are likely not due to lack of interest, but lack of certain infrastructure, Travel Oregon Outdoor Recreation Specialist Stephen Hatfield said.

"Camping is low compared with the state, but that's

probably because they're at capacity," he said.

Safety issues on U.S. Highway 101 and the general lack of opportunities for mountain biking on the coast in comparison to the rest of the state is likely the reason for little cycling.

Recommendations in the report include development of new recreation and camping areas, as well as better publicizing existing underutilized areas to help disperse crowds and limit environmental degradation.

Making smaller changes like adding bike lanes, lighted pedestrian crossings and adding more cautionary signs would also aid not just recreation, but overall congestion issues for locals and visitors.

Diversity

Some of the congestion issues could be addressed by better information about activities — a concern especially expressed by international travelers.

Several visitors commented on the difficulty they had with finding information about attractions, activities and events, suggesting more can be done to elevate lesser-known attractions.

Some visitors are also looking for more diversity. Between 19 and 23 percent of respondents said new events, different restaurants and shopping locations and activities would encourage them to visit the North Coast more frequently, and took issue with the limited hours of local shops.

More diversity within lodging wouldn't hurt, either — about one-third of respondents said more affordable accommodations would make them return more frequently.

There aren't easy answers to addressing any of these barriers. But a better understanding of the visitor experience is a place to start.

"It's good to know what people value, who they are, so you better understand why you're developing the products that you are," Gagliano said.



NANCY MCCARTHY

Wavy felted wool lines in coral and maroon are featured in Robin Montero's piece, "Study in Coral."



NANCY MCCARTHY

A close-up of felted wool sand dollars on Robin Montero's "Atomic Beach" hanging shows their three-dimensional quality.

Robin Montero shapes art according to her imagination

By Nancy McCarthy
For Seaside Signal

Poseidon awaits. His face is in profile, eyes focused ahead, his white hair flowing back in felted woolly waves, outlined against a black background.

"He's my favorite," said Seaside textile artist Robin Montero, who nods at the felted head of the mythological Greek god of the sea.

"He's the one that told me I could do this," she said. "He's the one who gave me the confidence to keep going."

The bas relief sculpture, along with several other of Montero's wall hangings, all formed with felted wool, are on exhibit at the Cannon Beach History Center & Museum through November. She also has a show at SunRose Gallery in Seaside.

Her innovative pieces reflect Montero's imagination, skill and experimentation with a variety of techniques.

Montero, a former professional theater costume designer, knows how to work with fabric, but she had never encountered felted wool until she "stumbled" across it while talking to a woman in a fabric shop. After reading some books, she thought, "I could do this."

"When I discovered this, the very first thing I made was a sand dollar. And then I wanted to do something more dimensional. I thought, 'Well I can draw faces, so why don't we try a face?'"

Poseidon hooked her. "There are so many things you can do with fiber," Montero said.

Her wall hangings range from multi-hued ocean waves and beaches in blues, tans and whites covered in three-dimensional sand dollars, to delicate daisies and a geisha mermaid.

She uses a combination of needle felting and wet felting in her work. Needle felting is done by poking strands of wool fibers through fabric with a barbed needle; the barbs catch the fibers and lock them into the fabric.

Wet felted wool is created by layering strands of woolen fibers perpendicular to each



NANCY MCCARTHY

"Coastal Daisies" by Robin Montero. Delicate daisies on a felted wool background is one of Robin Montero's simpler sculptures.

other, soaking them with hot water, brushing those layers through a mesh screen until they are combined and rolling them in bubble wrap until the fibers are bonded into a material, that, after it is air dried, can be cut and shaped.

Then the fun begins. It's up to Montero to decide what she wants to create and how to do that.

"This medium is wonderful because there are no rules, there are no limitations," she said.

In the center of the felted wool waves of one her works, lying on the felted, beaded wool sand is a glass bottle with a message inside.

"My dearly beloved, I can't wait to be with you again," says the message, written in Italian. "Here is the key to my heart. I will always love you. Love, Georgio."

"There is a key in the bottle," Montero said. "It's the skeleton key to my bathroom door."

That piece took about 150 hours to create, including sewing individual beads to look like small rocks among the sand dollars, which took the most time.

"But every now and then when you catch the twinkle — that's what it's all about. It's all about the details," Montero said.

History center Director Elaine Trucke asked Montero to exhibit her work because "I am a huge fan of felting and what artists do with it. I was

especially partial to the lamps that she created."

Some of Montero's work, including Poseidon and his wife, Amphitrite, look like Greek or Roman sculptures, Trucke said.

"But instead of cold stone you have soft and warm fabrics.... Her love of the sea, of historic art, and even her background in costume design. It's just so different from what most people are doing with textile."

But the details present challenges. When Montero knows what she wants to do, she usually develops her own technique — something that's not found in a "how to" book.

In her felted sculpture of a geisha mermaid on display at the SunRose Gallery, she used a variety of methods and materials. Along with a purple velvet jacket, sewn of leftover costume material, the mermaid wears a skirt of sequined black, blue and green fabric. Her fins are layers of silk organza and metallic threads. The pearl necklace hanging from a hook beside her reflects Montero's other interest in jewelry design. Entitled, "Proposal at Sea," the piece has a felted wool and beaded background in blues and lavenders.

Always thinking of the next project, Montero keeps a notebook of ideas, where no boundaries restrict her creativity.

"There are no rules," she said about her textiles. "That's the best part."

Local quilters share their creations with those in need

Church volunteers provide comfort, warmth

By Katherine Lacaze
Seaside Signal

On Thursday mornings, a fellowship hall at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in downtown Seaside bustles with the activity of a small but dedicated group of volunteers working meticulously to construct quilts that are sent across the world to people in need.

"We work with whoever comes," said Claudia Halliburton, who co-chairs the group along with Kathy Woerndle.

Even those who do not have a knack for sewing can be assigned a task, such as tying yarn or cutting squares. The members — which rarely exceed 10 at a time — routinely gather for about three hours each week to construct the quilts, which are distributed interstate and worldwide by Lutheran World Relief, an international outreach organization. Lutheran World Relief also provides hygiene kits and kits with items for infant care. In 2016, the most recent year for which numbers were reported, the organization distributed materials valuing \$13.3 million to 534,144 beneficiaries in 16 countries. Each year, the Seaside group contributes about 140 to 180 quilts, which are used for comfort and warmth, or in some cases, shelter.

"It's a service," said Halliburton, who has been part of the group off and on for more than 50 years. "You're helping other people, that's why we're all here."



KATHERINE LACAZE/FOR SEASIDE SIGNAL

Volunteers with a quilting group at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Seaside work on putting together quilts.

The quilters rely on donated fabric for quilt tops, sheets for backing, and yarn for ties. The only component they purchase for the quilts is batting. To that end, the volunteers also create quilts that can be purchased by the public, with all proceeds going directly back into crafting more quilts.

Besides using their time and skills to create a product that benefits others, the volunteers also see the time together as a chance for socializing, with each Thursday morning session including refreshments and a Bible study.

"We're kind of a support group, as much as a working group," Halliburton said. "We're here to enjoy ourselves and do something at the same time."

Woerndle agreed the value of the group is the camaraderie, "the giving and the taking."

"I have a lot of talent in the sewing department," she said. "It's a good way to make use of that and to give to somebody else."

Two times per year, the

group boxes the quilts at the church and a volunteer delivers them to the parent organization in Portland for wider distribution. A recent drop-off brought in about 65 quilts for donation.

Darby Gott has been involved in the group for about four years, although her contribution tends toward selecting attractive fabric to donate and cutting it into squares for "these wonderful sewers" to put together. Her volunteerism is worthwhile, she said, because she knows the quilts are going to people in need.

"You're doing something, even if it's a small thing, that will bring people comfort and a little bit of hope," she said.

To continue their work, the group is continually seeking donations of material in half-yard or larger pieces, made of 100 percent cotton or cotton/polyester blend. They also need clean sheets, sized for a double bed or larger. To make a donation, contact Halliburton at 503-505-1626 or email nursejane5895@gmail.com.

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