

Endeavour launch brings tourists, traffic to Fla.

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Space shuttle Endeavour is seen on pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center, Wednesday, April 27, 2011 in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Endeavour is scheduled to launch on its final mission on Friday April 29th. (AP Photo/Marta Lavandier)

(AP) -- Florida Space Coast hotels are sold out, residents are renting bedrooms and restaurants are doubling food supplies as thousands of tourists arriving for Friday's launch of space shuttle Endeavour are

boosting a region fearing its economic future.

The [launch](#) is the next-to-last for the program and President [Barack Obama](#) and his family will be in attendance.

"The shuttle program is winding down and this is something that is on everybody's bucket list," said Rob Varley, the area's top tourism official. "For many people, it's like 'Uh-oh. We only have two more chances to see one.'"

The mission is also attracting extra attention because its commander is Mark Kelly, whose wife is Arizona Congresswoman [Gabrielle Giffords](#). She is recuperating from a serious head wound suffered in a January assassination attempt, but arrived at Cape Canaveral on Wednesday and is expected to watch the launch from a private location.

Crowd estimates vary widely - Brevard County expects 250,000 visitors will attend. NASA's launch director says more than 500,000. And Varley is guessing 700,000. That figure would rival John Glenn's space shuttle launch in 1998 and those from some of the Apollo moon launches in the 1960s and 1970s.

Endeavour's launch may be one of the last economic jolts the region gets as the [space shuttle program](#) winds down this summer. Economic prospects for the area are precarious. The Space Coast is still reeling from Florida's housing slump, NASA contractors already have laid-off thousands of workers and the unemployment rate is over 11 percent. Empty storefronts dot some shopping malls and vacant condos are common along the beach.

Shuttle launches usually generate about \$5 million in economic activity for the Space Coast. Given the huge crowds expected, the Endeavour launch could generate more than \$15 million, Varley said.

Hotel reservations are almost impossible to get, so some homeowners and apartment building managers are renting out spare bedrooms and empty units.

Tony Simons placed an ad on Craigslist hoping to rent two empty units at the Seacoast Arms Apartments in Titusville, about a mile from one of the most popular places to view shuttle launches on the Indian River. "Come be a part of that history!!!" the ad said.

He got one rented for the launch but was still looking Wednesday for tourists willing to spend \$300 a night on the two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with a three-night minimum, just like the hotels. The launch is providing some extra cash for Simons, the apartment complex's manager, especially as the recession forced him to lower rents from \$750 to \$500 a month.

"Heaven yes!" Simons said when asked if he was expecting a small economic pop from the launch. Other businesses are too.

The storage space at Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant is jammed full with extra dry goods, paper plates and napkins. Owner Lauralee Thompson expects business to more than double on Friday from the usual 1,500 daily diners to more than 3,000 patrons looking for platefuls of rock shrimp, oysters and hush puppies. With an average check at \$17.50, Friday's revenue could spike to more than \$52,000 from the usual \$26,000 at Titusville's largest restaurant, with 465 seats.

"Shuttle launches are absolutely great for business," Thompson said.

But she worries the immense crowds, traffic gridlock and waits at the restaurant may lead to disappointment when diners can't get in or have to wait hours for a table.

"There is just no way to get everybody who wants to get here for the launch into the coastal area," Thompson said.

After the previous shuttle launch in February, some visitors returning to Orlando were stuck in traffic for three to five hours for a trip that normally takes an hour. The crowds overflowed into the roadways, blocking traffic.

"Cars couldn't get through them since the crowds overwhelmed them," said Bob Lay, the county's emergency management director. "It was almost like being in New Orleans at Mardi Gras."

Although a toll plaza was opened on the main highway between the Space Coast and Orlando so drivers could pass through without paying, it wasn't well-publicized and drivers ended up stopping anyway. This time around, local police agencies are getting the word out about no tolls, said Lt. Todd Maddox, a spokesman for the Brevard County Sheriff's Office.

"Once they start to stop, it's a trickle-down effect," Maddox said. "It backs all the way up and it becomes a parking lot."

Traffic is expected to be so congested that if the countdown is halted at the last minute because of poor weather or technical problems, NASA may delay the next attempt by two days instead of one to avoid launch team members getting stuck in traffic and unable to get enough rest for the 24-hour turnaround.

Local police agencies also plan to use the county's emergency operations center so they can coordinate traffic flow better. Cocoa Beach schools are planning to let students out early, if the launch stays on schedule, to avoid the traffic headaches. Obama and his entourage will not affect traffic since his plane will land at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, next to the Kennedy Space Center.

Lay advises anybody who doesn't need to come into the northern half of the county to stay away.

For those who do come, "they need to bring patience and they need to know it's going to take time," Lay said. "If they've got that, then they'll have a wonderful day."

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