The Boston Globe

South Coast cities gear up for summer tourism season amid economic uncertainty

By Omar Mohammed Globe Staff, Updated May 28, 2025, 12:06 p.m.

tourism season amid economic uncertainty in the country. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

FAIRHAVEN — The Delano Homestead Bed and Breakfast sits on a tree-lined street in the center of the historic village right across from Fairhaven Town Hall, the 19th-century French Gothic building where Mark Twain is said to have given a speech.

It’s the kind of neighborhood tourists love to find in New England, one that attracts visitors to the region, especially in summer.

“People will come and spend, let’s say, four days and go to Cape Cod for a day, go to Martha’s Vineyard for a day, stay local for a day, and go to Newport for a day,” said Paul Beauchamp, owner of Fairhaven’s Delano Homestead, which at one point was owned by the family of America’s 32nd president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

But in a time of economic uncertainty in Massachusetts and the country, there is some anecdotal evidence of people pulling back, even as some tourism officials are optimistic.

Beauchamp said that his bed and breakfast saw a slight slowdown for summer bookings. Typically, his business starts to receive reservations in January or February for the summer. This year, it took a bit longer and the bookings are for shorter stays than in the past.

“It was not unusual for us to see people book for a week or 10 days before. I don’t think we have many bookings like that,” he said. Still, “things are starting to fill in. ... There were concerns early but things have turned around."

A view of the Delano Homestead, a bed and breakfast in Fairhaven. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

In nearby New Bedford, inside the Whaling Museum downtown, visitors are greeted with huge skeletal figures of whales hanging from the ceiling. The space attracted more than 82,000 visitors in 2024 and its chief executive Amanda McMullen expects to surpass that number this year.

“We’re off to a very good start,” she said.

McMullen said the current economic uncertainty reminded her of 2021 and 2022 as the severity of the COVID pandemic was waning. People were reluctant to travel far, either for health or financial reasons. A similar

dynamic could come into play this year if Americans become more worried about their pocketbooks.

“I think we’re going to see an increase of that local traveler,” she said.

The museum, for example, has been doing targeted social media advertising within a 90-mile radius in anticipation that people may not travel far this year, she said.

Whale skeletons at the New Bedford Whaling Museum.David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Alyssa Botelho, who runs the office that coordinates tourism and economic development in Fairhaven, said the town is ramping up events for the summer like an event in June to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the film “Jaws" to compliment the celebrations that are set to take place in

nearby Martha's Vineyard, where the movie was filmed. Fairhaven is also leaning into its revolutionary war past to appeal to history buffs, she said.

"I've gotten a lot of calls from the Midwest ... Kentucky, Ohio, all these places people are tracing back the Delanos and their own family lines," she said. "That history piece is really big."

Botelho said the town is hoping to entice regional travelers to opt for Fairhaven as their destination of choice this summer. The town has advertised in Boston- and Rhode Island-based publications to lure local tourists. Plus, she hopes that the advent of the South Coast rail line could make it easy for Boston-based residents to visit.

"We had never advertised in the Boston area before," she said. "We've got the infrastructure now, and in case you haven't heard, Fairhaven, it's a nice place to come."

Alyssa Botelho manages the tourism and economic development portfolio for Fairhaven.David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Laura Orleans, who runs the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center that's a few steps away from the Whaling Museum, suggested that in times of economic anxiety, people may choose to stay closer to home in their vacations, which could help New Bedford and the broader South Coast.

"Instead of taking a trip to Europe, maybe you're taking a tour to New England or maybe within New England," she said.

For families looking for budget travel options, New Bedford is situated to help them take advantage of all the attractions the South Coast has to offer, said Ashley Payne, the director of tourism and marketing for the city.

"You're not going to find tourists trapped here in our city," Payne said. "Where we're positioned geographically and how we're positioned as that budget-friendly option that's great for families that are traveling, it's great for older couples who might be looking for a quieter destination that fits within their budget as well."

Genevieve Iorio could be the type of tourist that Payne and others hope to see more of on the South Coast this summer season.

On a recent afternoon, she drove from Quincy to New Bedford looking for what she described as a little bit of Europe in Massachusetts.

“I came down to New Bedford out of curiosity to enjoy the day with my niece. You know, looking for a different flavor in the state,” she said. “Everybody knows Cape Cod. I know Boston well. I’ve been to Gloucester. But New Bedford just seemed very interesting because of the Portuguese community, the cuisine, being on the water, the historical district, the whaling history, and so we came down to explore and learn more about the city.”