

Just how affordable is OC?

■ Even as condos replace eateries and older hotels, good deals can be found

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — When 65 percent of respondents to a 2004 town survey said they were parents coming to the resort with their children for a vacation, the town confirmed they were still a “family resort.”

Whether Ocean City is still the resort for blue-collar and middle-class families is a much different, tougher question.

In the Hotel Motel Restaurant Association survey, 35 percent of visitors came from Maryland where the average family income is about \$82,000, according to U.S. Census data, while 30 percent came from Pennsylvania where the average family income is nearly \$69,000.

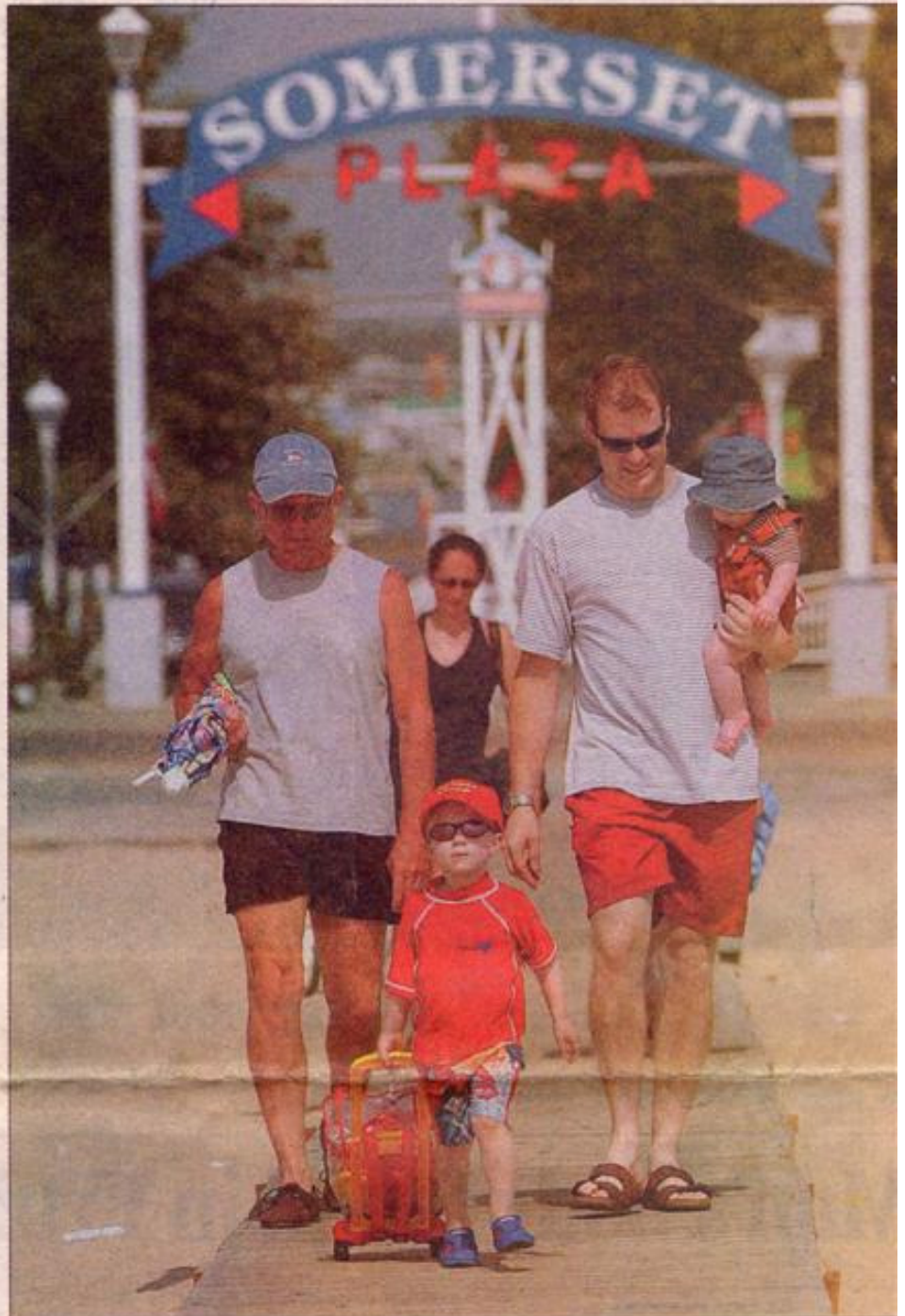
When the Junebugs clear out and those families are able to come to the resort on vacation in July and August, hotels and motels react to the increased demand by increasing hotel prices to an average of nearly \$250 a night.

Of course, cheaper deals can be found, but for the typical family of four spending six nights in Ocean City with two bedrooms, that comes out to a hefty \$3,000 for rooms before food and entertainment are even considered. That's more than 4 percent of a Pennsylvania family's annual earnings to sleep in town for a week.

“I think with two incomes it's doable, but with one it's tough,” said David Paton of Baltimore, who comes to Ocean City every year with his son. I think in some ways it is still a family resort, but it's real expensive to come down. Two people can drop a couple hundred dollars a day if you're not careful.”

Carousel General Manager and District 38B Republican House of Delegates candidate Michael James said he does believe the resort took a turn toward white collar recently, but that it was short-lived and the market is correcting itself back down to the affordability of middle-income families.

“The start of Ocean City turning more white collar turned that way in 2002 and 2003 when condominium rentals skyrocketed. But the laws of economics kicked in in 2005 and Ocean City had too many condos



Anne Uitz ph

Grandfather James Kralec Sr. and father James Kralec Jr. walk with Zach, 2, and Will, 6 months, down a boardwalk entrance at the beach in Ocean City.

OC

From Page 1

and those prices fell," James said.

The resort has a condo surplus as 3,500 units currently sit for sale. However, during the condo rush, nine hotels with 490 rooms total were torn down for high-priced condos. Several family-priced restaurants like BJ's South downtown were torn down for condos, too.

With condos and massive hotels like the brand-new Hilton at 3200 Baltimore Ave. replacing older, cheaper hotels, there are fewer cheap rooms left on the island.

"The larger people tore down smaller hotels and built bigger ones, and have to charge more to pay off their new mortgages," said Susan Jones, Hotel Motel Restaurant Association director.

But Jones said it's more perception that those big, expensive hotels are the only options left.

"The people who can afford to advertise are the larger hotels," Jones said. "The blue-collar guy in Baltimore reading The Sun doesn't see the King Charles Hotel for only \$79 so the perception has gotten out there that we're overpriced."

Ocean City Mayor Rick Meehan believes the town is still for all types of families but recognizes changes from his days as a youth here.

"I still think we have a diverse cross section of people, but there probably are more professional people and fami-

How to save in OC

The following are hints from the Ocean City Hotel Motel Restaurant Association and various area business owners on how to save money on vacation in Ocean City.

■ **Make advance reservations.** Like airline tickets, the closer to the date of stay the reservation is made the more it costs.

■ **Shop around.** Many bigger, more expensive hotels advertise more, but there are plenty of hidden deals at smaller establishments.

■ **Stay on weekdays.** Most hotels price Sunday through Thursday anywhere from \$20 to \$50 cheaper per night.

■ **Take advantage of the free stuff.** Ocean City hosts a variety of free concerts and events every week while free athletic fields and courts are always available. The beach is

also always free.

■ **Pick up coupons.** The Route 50 and Convention Center visitor centers have abundant supplies of free coupons good at establishments all over the resort.

■ **Grab a local paper.** Advertisements and coupons point out where the best family deals are located.

■ **Use public transport.** The Park and Ride lot is free, which saves parking costs, and it only costs \$2 to ride the bus in Ocean City all day.

■ **Make an agenda.** Plan what events the family wants to do and spend more time on the ones with a lower cost.

lies," Meehan said. "If you look around, our prices are still comparable."

Prices could be comparable, but still not affordable to the middle class, though. A virtual consensus among people interviewed was that people are now vacationing for shorter amounts of time — often two or three days instead of one or two weeks. That is why hotels raise rates \$20 to \$50 on weekends.

While Meehan chalks that change in vacation habits up to the busy schedules of two working parent families with busy kids, many feel it's because those families can't afford the resort for as long a vacation as they used to, which may hurt lots of businesses.

"Stay a week, buy a chair.

Stay two days, buy a towel," said Oyster Bay and Tackle owner Sue Foster. "You're not going to buy a \$100 fishing rod like if you stay all week. You're going to buy a \$20 ... rent-a-rod."

Even weekend visitation numbers for the resort's busiest month of July have been dwindling slightly, though, with 301,500 visiting per weekend in 2004, 297,800 visiting per weekend in 2005 and 293,500 visiting per weekend so far in 2006, according to town figures.

However, James said the Carousel has been packed the past few weeks and that he's heard the same for many resort hotels.

■ jhodgkins@dmg.gannett.com