

Colorado's record tourism growth hits new milestone: 86 million visitors, \$1.28 billion in tax revenue

Tourism office pushes back against notion of "loving the state to death"

[John Wenzel](#) June 28, 2018 at 12:01 am

Colorado hosted a record 86 million visitors in 2017 who spent nearly \$21 billion during their in-state travels, according to new report compiled by the state's tourism office.

The 84.7 million U.S.-based travelers and nearly 1 million international visitors also generated a total of \$1.28 billion in state and local tax revenues, studies found, marking the eighth consecutive year of record-setting growth.

"Colorado has been emerging as a national destination over the past five or six years, and we're continuing to carve out our share of the marketable leisure travelers in the U.S.," said Cathy Ritter, director of the Colorado Tourism Office. "That holds great promise, especially with additional investment into the tourism sector in the future."

Colorado tourism has enjoyed consistent growth since the recession in 2009, with domestic visitors increasing by 41 percent, or more than double the national growth rate of 20 percent.

The state numbers parallel [rosy reports touted by Denver officials last week](#), which found a record 31.7 million visitors to the Mile High City in 2017, marking the 12th consecutive year of growth. Denver gets about 20 percent of the visitors in the state but accounts for half of all in-state tourism spending.

However, Colorado's gains come at the expense of some of the country's top-tier and longtime tourism hotspots, such as New York City and Las Vegas, according to research, as travelers increasingly turn toward the Rocky Mountain West and Colorado in particular.

"We're getting a significant number of travelers from New York, Miami, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., in addition to the traditional markets that we've traded in, like the Midwest, California and Texas," Ritter said.

Other findings:

- In 2017, the Colorado travel industry directly supported 171,000 jobs and earnings of more than \$6.3 billion, a 3.4 percent increase over 2016.
- Colorado last year attracted 37.9 million overnight travelers, including 34 million leisure (non-business) travelers. By comparison, Denver had 17 million overnight visitors in 2017.
- The state overall saw a 2 percent increase in marketable leisure travelers in 2017 – on top of a 9 percent increase in that category in 2016. While the rest of the U.S. was flat in 2017 (and up 4 percent in 2016), Colorado's increases moved the state from the 13th-largest share to 8th largest share of these travelers in just two years.
- The most popular place to visit in Colorado is the Denver metro

area. Last year, 6 in 10 vacationers spent at least some time there, and 46 percent spent at least one night.

- 1 in 4 leisure visitors spent time in the mountain towns and ski resorts, Pikes Peak Region and/or the northern Front Range in 2017.
- About 1 in 7 tourists visited the Western Slope Region, while 1 in 20 took in the Eastern Plains or San Luis Valley.

Unsurprisingly, statewide tourism growth is intertwined with the Front Range's population boom. Residential and commercial-construction trends drive further investment, Ritter said, resulting in new hotels, condos and restaurants from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs.

The state's [research](#), drawn from reports by Longwood International and Dean Runyan & Associates, also shows the effectiveness of the Colorado Tourism Office's "Come to Life" marketing campaign, which targeted both national and international visitors. While several top-tier travel states lost market share last year, Colorado retained its record high 3.1 percent share of the coveted marketable-travelers segment, according to the studies.

"That pays off for every single destination in our state," Ritter said, noting that "funnels" such as the tourism website colorado.com reliably send visitors to other websites and destinations across the state — not simply along the Front Range or to well-known mountain towns.

"Our research shows that when we advertise ski and snow destinations in Colorado, it doesn't just benefit them," Ritter said. "The top destinations for people who were exposed to our winter

advertising were Denver, Breckenridge and Colorado Springs. Two of those three cities don't even have ski slopes."

The Colorado Tourism Office has a lot to show for its relatively unchanged, year-over-year budget of \$19.6 million — which will only increase by about \$500,000 for the next fiscal year beginning July 1, despite the record-breaking gains in visitors. SMARInsights reported the state's "Come to Life" campaign, which cost \$8.14 million, generated a record-high return on investment of \$546 for every \$1 of paid media — up from \$534 in the previous year.

"We're looking very carefully at how to target more precisely, and how to spend dollars more effectively and strategically," Ritter said. "We're looking for those big wins, like getting [\(the Bravo series\) 'Top Chef'](#) here last year. That really increased awareness of Colorado, but it was not a free 'ask.' They needed commitment from destinations and we put together a statewide coalition of partners to bid for it."

Legal, recreational cannabis did not provide a significant point of interest for tourists, Ritter said. Two-thirds of people surveyed by SMARI from 2013 to 2018 said it doesn't affect their decision either way; 22 to 25 percent say it's part of what interests them in traveling to Colorado; and roughly 11 percent say they are negatively influenced by its availability.

"This is why I usually say that for most travelers, it's a big ho-hum," Ritter said.

Pushing back against suggestions that record tourism is resulting in ["loving Colorado to death"](#) — a common complaint among natives — Ritter said visitors are not necessarily to blame for traffic woes or

overcrowding at popular destinations. Rather, that's the result of the state's population boom and the infrastructure needed to address it.

"To say that we need less tourism in Colorado is to say that we need fewer jobs and fewer tax revenues, because that's what tourism brings," she said. "It's an enormous benefit and the revenues support local governments, firefighters, schools and other areas that are dear to Coloradans."