

RALEIGH, N.C. (Aug. 18, 2023) — After taking the backseat to rural counterparts in the post-pandemic recovery, North Carolina's urban centers registered robust gains in 2022 visitor spending, according to data released Friday by the N.C. Department of Commerce. The preliminary findings from an annual study commissioned by [Visit North Carolina](#), a unit of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), reflect the economic impact of tourism on local economies across the state.

"As we celebrate a record \$33.3 billion in visitor spending statewide, we're pleased that counties that rely on business travel as well as leisure trips are doing well," said N.C. Commerce Secretary Machel Baker Sanders. "Tourism has long been one of North Carolina's most vital industries, and we can take pride in the hospitality and authentic experiences that appeal to the needs and interests of millions of visitors who come to our state each year."

The visitor spending study, commissioned by Visit NC and conducted by Tourism Economics in collaboration with the U.S. Travel Association, provides preliminary estimates of domestic and international traveler expenditures as well as employment, payroll income, and state and local tax revenues directly generated by these expenditures. The statistical model draws on detailed data from Visit NC as well as data derived from federal and state government sources, nationally known private and non-profit travel organizations, and other travel industry sources.

Key findings from the report:

- 2022 saw a strong resurgence for North Carolina's urban counties. Wake, Mecklenburg and Durham were among the counties that led the state's 15.2 percent growth in visitor spending, which reached a record \$33.3 billion.
- Forty-five of the state's 100 counties had double-digit increases in visitor spending. Eight of the top 10 (Davidson, Durham, Mecklenburg, Wake, Orange, Guilford, Forsyth and Cabarrus) are [regarded](#) as urban or regional city/suburban. Caswell and Granville, the other top 10 counties, are classified as rural.
- Growth in direct tourism employment was more evenly distributed among rural and urban counties with more than a quarter seeing double-digit increases. Durham led all counties with a 23 percent increase. Other counties with top increases in tourism employment were Martin (up 20 percent), Orange (up 20 percent), and Davidson (up 19 percent).
- Mecklenburg received \$5.3 billion (up 31 percent) in traveler expenditures to lead all counties. Wake ranked second with \$3.0 billion (up 26 percent), followed by Buncombe (\$2.9 billion, up 9 percent), Dare (\$2.0 billion, up 8 percent), Guilford (\$1.5 billion, up 20 percent), Brunswick (\$1.1 billion, up 12 percent), New Hanover (\$1.1 billion, up 14 percent), Durham (\$1.0 billion, up 31 percent), Forsyth (\$988 million, up 19 percent) and Moore (\$750 million, up 11 percent).
- Mecklenburg had the largest number of direct tourism employees (33,627), an increase of 18 percent from 2021. Four other counties had more than 10,000 direct tourism employees: Wake (24,591, up 15 percent), Buncombe (19,310, up 6 percent), Dare (12,030, down 2 percent) and Guilford (10,979, up 15 percent).

As [previously reported](#), travel statewide rose 15.2 percent in 2022 to set a record in visitor spending. That increase followed a 2021 turnaround from the pandemic's 2020 peak, which brought a devastating drop of 32 percent in visitor spending. For 2021's reversal of fortunes, eight of the top 10 counties in percentage growth were classified as rural (the exceptions were Buncombe and Cabarrus).

“Tourism is more than an essential industry for the state,” said Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit NC. “It’s an economic development force in all 100 of our counties, the places where travelers experience our scenic beauty and adventure, our cuisine and unique culture, our history and the dynamic forces that create our enduring appeal. Our visitor spending reports underscore the value of these assets in terms of jobs and tax revenues that relieve some of the burden on residents. We look forward to continued success in welcoming people to experience places they won’t find anywhere else.”

Full tables can be accessed at partners.visitnc.com/economic-impact-studies. Will go live as soon as release is posted

Statewide visitor spending highlights:

Total spending by domestic and international visitors in North Carolina reached \$33.3 billion in 2022. That sum represents a 15.2 percent increase over 2021 expenditures. The figure falls 14 percent above the record \$29.22 billion spent in 2019.

- Domestic travelers spent a record \$32.4 billion in 2022. Spending was up 13.4 percent from \$28.6 billion in 2021.
- International travelers spent \$910 million in 2022, up 170 percent from the previous year.
- Visitors to North Carolina generated \$4.2 billion in federal, state and local taxes in 2022. The total represents a 7.9 percent increase from 2020.
- State tax receipts from visitor spending rose 6.5 percent to nearly \$1.3 billion in 2022.
- Local tax receipts grew 3.5 percent to nearly \$1.2 billion.
- Direct tourism employment in North Carolina increased 9.8 percent to 216,900.
- Direct tourism payroll increased 13.5 percent to \$8.7 billion.
- Visitors spend more than \$91 million per day in North Carolina. That spending adds \$6.7 million per day to state and local tax revenues (about \$3.5 million in state taxes and \$3.2 million in local taxes).
- Each North Carolina household saved \$512 on average in state and local taxes as a direct result of visitor spending in the state. Savings per capita averaged \$230.
- North Carolina hosted approximately 43 million visitors in 2022.

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