

Marin hotels get glimmer of good news

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Occupancy rates at Marin hotels rose 0.1 percent in August, a fractional improvement that was welcomed by hoteliers in an economy that has sent tourism dollars plummeting.

According to a report from PKF Consulting in San Francisco, Marin hotels were 84.2 percent full in August, up from 84.1 percent for the same period in 2008.

Normally such a slight improvement would not be cause for celebration, but on the heels of six straight months of double-digi drops in occupancy - including a whopping 35.5 percent in January - Marin Convention & Visitors Bureau President Mark Essman said he welcomes the good news. Marin was the only county in the Bay Area to see its occupancy rate rise compared with a year ago.

"We're happy, we'll take it - it's good news," Essman said. "A lot of travelers are starting to get focused on vacationing in their area and that has tremendous advantages for us because we're centrally located between San Francisco and Napa."

Marin was the only region in the Bay Area to see its hotel occupancy rate increase in August. The East Bay's occupancy rate dropped 16.2 percent, while Monterey, San Jose/Peninsula, Sonoma and Napa were all down more than 8 percent. The Central Valley was down 18.8 percent. Even San Francisco's hotels were down 4.6 percent.

"Everyone has taken a pounding in this economy," Essman said, "but we're in a very fortunate position in a lot of ways."

Pat Sorber, general manager at Embassy Suites in San Rafael, said her hotel has seen a slight uptick in occupancy rates for the past few months.

"People who might normally stay in the city have found that Marin is a nice alternative if they're going between the city and wine country," she said. "And more people than ever are utilizing the ferry system in Larkspur to get to the city, with hotels providing shuttles to the ferry."

Room rates at Marin hotels were a different story. The average room rate at Marin hotels in August was \$151.25, down 15 percent from \$178.03 a year ago. Hotels throughout Northern California have lowered room rates in the hopes of luring travelers. In August, Napa's average room rate was down nearly 20 percent to \$234.79, while San Francisco's was down 18.2 percent to \$148.60.

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