**Champaign County tourism thrives with the help of U of I campus life**

The University of Illinois proves to be one of the main factors driving visitors to Champaign County regularly.

At first, it may be easy to view Champaign as a small college town surrounded by never-ending cornfields; however, local tourism business booms once visitors immerse themselves in the town’s culture, arts, athletics and cuisine. Some say that this small town has a modernized, big city feel that even extends to other towns within Champaign County.

With the University of Illinois being the center of attention in Champaign County, it could be considered the heartbeat that keeps Champaign County booming. There is always something going on to draw in visitors, but the numbers especially peak in the fall. Terri Reifsteck, vice president of marketing and community engagement with Visit Champaign County, explains that the area’s busiest season runs from early September until late October. “Those two months, in general, are non-stop between students returning, events that are happening in town and certainly with football games, all of those bring people here. Not just Illini fans, but also visiting fans,” Reifsteck said.

However, some weekends are more bustling than others. When Dads Weekend comes in November, Moms Weekend in April and graduation soon after in May, the number of visitors peaks once again. Paula Hancock, a Champaign resident who rents her home out on Airbnb, had to put a cap on how many weekends she was allowing her house to be booked. Reflecting on this past year, Hancock said, “Without thinking about it, I rented out my house 60 nights. I was out of my house two months out of the whole year. I was exhausted at the end of the year, so this year I’m not doing it that much! The year before, my first full year, I had rented it out about 43 nights, and that was okay.”

While Hancock hosts visitors at her house, she explains how having her parents in the area makes it easier, as she is able to stay with them while her house is occupied. In fact, her dad often jokes around and asks, “Where’s my cut?”

Hancock has been renting her home through Airbnb for two and a half years, enduring “mostly really positive experiences” along the way. Personally, my mom and I had the pleasure of staying in her home over Moms Weekend in April of 2019 with three other moms and their students. My mom, Cindy Brennan, is becoming an Airbnb pro, as our family attends all Illinois football games in the fall. Although we have stayed in six Airbnbs around the U.S., half of those have been in Champaign. “Every single one has been super clean and super nice,” Cindy Brennan said.

Coming to campus often, my family has stayed in a variety of homes and hotels. For weekends complete with events and activities on the U of I campus, visitors take advantage of any place they can get their hands on, as rooms tend to book quickly.

Specifically, at the Illini Union Hotel, Caitlin Aylmer, the main desk attendant, said, “Any of the busy weekends, including football games, you have to book a year in advance. The reservations will open the Monday following the event. We open the booking online, and the next year will usually sell out in three minutes, this year it was two. We can open the waitlist the day after.” However, Aylmer also explained that outside of high traffic weekends like Dads and Moms weekends, graduation and football games, not many people know that there is a hotel within the Union. “So it doesn’t book up on its own,” Aylmer said.

Typically, the Illini Union Hotel hosts a lot of alumni, since they are aware of the hotel which lies inside one of the main hubs of student life on campus. “They like to relive their campus experience and show their kids around and the spots they know about,” Aylmer said. Those busy weekends, a few business conventions and alumni are what keep the hotel active.

In the annual Visit Champaign County reports, hotel occupancy rates and average daily rates are shown. In the 2015-2016 annual report, Smith Travel Research, or STR, documented that the hotel occupancy rate was 61.06%, with average daily rates at $85.60. However, more recently, in the 2018-2019 report, there is a small drop in occupancy. The most recent report documents the hotel occupancy rate as 57.6%, with the average daily rate being $87.39.

Although many factors could play a role in causing the drop, the rise of Airbnbs for rent in the community could be the main culprit. In 2018, sources including the Wall Street Journal reported a 40% revenue growth rate from the year before. Airbnb’s most recent financial data shows this year’s first-quarter growth rate alone above 30%.

Coming to campus for a non-game weekend is a different experience, not only in Champaign, but also while online booking rooms, renting houses or making plans for the weekend. Graduation weekend, in particular, is a premium weekend that requires lodging reservations to be made a year in advance, with a steep price hike too.

Margie Fazio, mom of a recent 2017 chemical engineering grad, reflected on how the planning leading up to graduation day panned out. She described her experience as “eye-opening, a little bit unnerving, surprising and difficult.” She went on to explain, “We booked a year in advance and there were already hotels that were booked solid. Some of the hotels wanted $800 for that weekend per night.”

Not wanting to spend more than $200 per night, it was challenging to find an affordable hotel, explained Fazio. The Fazio family ended up finding a reasonable deal with the LaQuinta in Champaign, but after experiencing the challenges of U of I graduation, Fazio said she was more prepared when it came to booking a hotel for graduation at the University of Iowa, where her second son studies computer science. Although both Big Ten schools “require” reserving accommodations one year in advance, one major difference between the two schools was the price. Fazio found the University of Iowa to be cheaper.

“I think it’s because Cedar Rapids is near Iowa City, and there are other, bigger towns, that are near Iowa City, so there just may be more hotel rooms available. I have a feeling Champaign doesn’t have any large cities that are within an hour of it, and so that might be what is driving up the cost,” Fazio said.

Despite some struggles and challenges when it comes to lodging reservations, visitors keep coming back. Reifsteck claims that many people come back not only because of how welcoming the community is, but also because of the element of surprise that this area holds. “I think that it is more vibrant than people expect it to be. It really surprises people when they come driving down here through acres of corn and soy fields. It’s a completely different feel than what people are expecting,” she said.

Additionally, Champaign County is constantly making improvements for both visitors and residents. Although technology helps draw people to the area through online advertisements, Reifsteck believes collaboration with others in the community helps boost the number of visitors as well. Specifically, a new sports complex was just approved in Rantoul, about 25 minutes north of Champaign. This complex is projected to be a big draw for the sports tourism market, one of the busiest markets for Champaign County. With the expansion of fields, there will be more opportunities to bring a lot more business to the area, which will be a boost for economic development.

Reifsteck said, “Working with things like the marathon, or the Krannert Center, or Ebertfest, helps boost those audiences that are naturally coming here already, but kind of expanding that story a little bit can certainly help bring more awareness to the area and more people coming to town.”

**Source List**

**Interviewees:**

* Paula Hancock, paula@mckinley-foundation.org, 217-344-0297 ext. 103
* Terri Reifsteck, terrir@visitchampaigncounty.org, 217-351-4133
* Caitlin Aylmer, cmaylmer@illinois.edu, 217-333-3747
* Margie Fazio, margiefazio@hotmail.com, 630-908-0445
* Cindy Brennan, brennancindy@msn.com, 630-269-1590

**Data:**

* Visit Champaign County 2015-2016 Annual Report: <https://www.visitchampaigncounty.org/media-library/documents/Reports/FY16-ANNUAL-REPORT.pdf>
* Visit Champaign County 2018-2019 Annual Report: <https://www.visitchampaigncounty.org/media-library/documents/Reports/FY19_Annual_Report.pdf>
* The Wall Street Journal: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/airbnbs-first-quarter-financials-show-strong-growth-rate-cash-reserves-11565998183>