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## Pinal County sees larger visitor impact

By Sarah Boggan  
Tribune



*The Santos family of Queen Creek, from left, Jackie, Sara, 8, Dylan, 13, and Javier, check out the history of the Casa Grande Ruins National Park, which is one of the tourist sites in Pinal County that is enjoying an increase in tourism.*

*For the Tribune*

That spending accounts for tourism growth in many areas - from more tax dollars flowing into local government coffers to more employment opportunities.

Nearly 300,000 tourists visited Pinal County between January and October this year. That is up from about 260,000 visitors in 2002. While most tourists come from other parts of the state, the county has also attracted people from 20 countries this year, Pinal County officials said. According to the report "Arizona Travel Impacts," completed by Dean Runyan Associates for the Arizona Department of Tourism, traveler spending at Pinal County destinations increased from \$205 million in 1998 to about \$402 million in 2006.

"That spending has increased travel-generated earnings from \$49.5 million in 1998 to \$96.4 million in 2006 - that's the largest annualized percentage increase in travel-generated earnings for any county in the state between 1998 and 2006," said AnnDee Johnson, director of research and strategic planning for the Arizona Department of Tourism. Travel-generated earnings are what workers earn in Pinal County as a result of tourism-related spending.

Money from tourism "generated jobs that went from 2,780 in 1998 to 4,690 jobs in 2006," Johnson said. "Those jobs exist in Pinal County because visitors come there. The jobs created by the spending is pretty significant."

Growth in Pinal County is driving the increase in tourism, she said.

"As there are more hotels and more places for visitors to come and potentially spend money, that means spending as it flows through Pinal County is generating jobs, earnings and taxes in Pinal County," Johnson said. "It's a tribute to growth in Pinal County."

With five state parks and six historical museums sprinkled throughout the county, four Indian reservations, the Casa Grande Ruins, a little-known Greek Orthodox monastery near Florence, a sky-diving school in Eloy and one of the largest open pit mines in the world near Kearny, there's a lot to see.

"You can do everything here from walking in the desert to free-falling through the sky - what more could you ask for?" said Patricia Judy, manager of the Pinal County Visitor Center. "Pinal County has a diversity of scenery, it has a diversity of historical areas, and it's growing to meet the needs of tourists wanting more luxury that is usually found in larger cities."

County officials think tourism numbers are picking up due to online advertising, an increased number of local Web sites and attractions that are unique to the area.

Pinal County spokeswoman Heather Murphy said the county is redesigning its Web site. Due to the influx in tourism, the revised site will include a menu for visitors along with site menus for residents and businesses.

"We've never really had visitor-specific information on the Web site," she said. "Now we will be able to count the hits."

Judy said the county begins to see larger increases in tourism after Thanksgiving when winter residents across Arizona come seeking things to do.

Apache Junction, Casa Grande and the Florence area top the list for popular Pinal County destinations, according to information provided by the Pinal County Visitors Bureau.

But not every tourist locale has been picking up more visitors in Pinal County.

One of the five state parks, Boyce Thompson Arboretum near Superior, is about 2,000 visitors behind where it was this time last year.

"I don't really have an idea why, unless the really hot summer affected them," Judy said. "Summer lasted longer than most people figured, and they are an outdoor park."

Judy said the fact that Pinal County isn't a large metropolitan area makes it attractive to tourists.

"We're still rural," Judy said. "Not everyone likes the busyness of Phoenix, and some like Tucson, but most of them want some place that is quiet. They come to Pinal County because of the history here."

### **Pinal County Visitor Center**

**Where:** 330 E. Butte Road, Florence

**Hours:** 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 8 a.m. to noon Saturday

**Information:** (520) 868-4331 or [www.co.pinal.az.us/VisitorCenter/](http://www.co.pinal.az.us/VisitorCenter/)

