

SC golf courses help drive the tourism economy, a new study says

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Phil Mickelson hits his ball during the final round of the 2021 PGA Championship at the Ocean Course on Kiawah Island. The high-profile event, which Mickelson won, drew about 40,000 spectators. File/Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

In the midst of a boom for the activity, South Carolina has taken a closer look at golf's economic impact on the state.

A new study from the **S.C. Golf Course Owners Association** — its first since 2019 — showed golf generated about \$3.3 billion in sales in the state during 2021. The sport also employed nearly 38,000 workers and generated \$1.5 billion in wages and income, according to the report.

Golf produces more revenue for South Carolina than any other single recreation or entertainment activity, and a significant portion comes from leisure travelers who tee it up while on vacation.

Golf is considered by tourism leaders to be one of the state's core and identifying assets, along the lines of its beaches and food. Unlike much of the visitor sector, it still did well during the height of the pandemic in 2020 as homebound people sought outdoor activities. That momentum carried into 2021, and key indicators shot up. Rounds played in the state were up almost 14 percent, and golf-related admissions taxes were up 48 percent. Many of the state's about 300 golf courses reported being booked to capacity.

"Golf has experienced a recent resurgence," **Terry Sedalik**, the association's executive director, wrote in a letter about the report sent to the **General Assembly** last week. He added that the game has played a role in the state's economic recovery from the pandemic.

Tourists who played golf during their trips to the Palmetto State last year spent about \$1.1 billion off the course at hotels, restaurants, retailers and other venues, the association estimates — not counting their spending at the layouts they patronize.

The top golf destination in the state is Myrtle Beach, attracting about half of that crowd, followed by Hilton Head Island, then Charleston.

The top three states, in order, that out-of-state golfers are traveling from are North Carolina, Ohio and Georgia.

Travelers who come to play golf in South Carolina have a median age of 51 and a median household income between \$100,000 and \$125,000, according to the report. Their stays average about four nights.

For more than a quarter of those visitors, outdoor recreation was the reason for their trip. The new report also noted the big boost South Carolina golf got by hosting three major events in spring 2021.

The long-running **RBC Heritage** on Hilton Head and the **PGA Championship** on Kiawah Island, both of which had attendance restrictions because of COVID-19, drew about 27,000 and 40,000 in-person spectators, respectively. Last June, slightly less than 30,000 fans attended the **Palmetto Championship** at **Congaree** in Ridgeland.

All the major metrics from the report showed significant growth from the association's last study, which included data from 2018. Golf-related sales grew about 27 percent in that three-year period, from \$2.59 billion in 2018, and golf employs 6,525 more people than it did three years ago.

The sport has also been seeing growth on a national scale. Since around 2000, rounds played in the U.S. had been consistently slipping. Then, when the pandemic hit, things turned around. In just the last two years, rounds played recovered to what they had been two decades ago, [according to figures tracked by Golf Datatech](#).

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