



## Guest Columnist - Putting Maryland on map as a top tourism destination

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By ARIS MELISSARATOS,  
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One of our top priorities at the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development is driving tourism in Maryland. Not only is tourism and its related industries one of our largest economic generators and largest employers, it is a key factor in attracting and retaining businesses.

This week, I joined Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., First Lady Kendel Ehrlich and Comptroller William Donald Schaefer at the 23rd Annual Maryland Governor's Tourism Industry Conference at Turf Valley Resort and Conference Center in Ellicott City. Among other issues facing tourism, the conference took a hard look at the economic impact of tourism in Maryland and how we can continue the industry's positive momentum.

Despite the many challenges faced by the industry nationally and internationally, Maryland's tourism industry remains strong. More than 19 million visitors choose Maryland as their vacation destination each year. Tourism and its related industries pump more than \$8.5 billion into the economy, generate \$709 million in state and local taxes and provide 105,400 jobs. Tourism also has one of the best returns on investment of any industry in the state: For every dollar spent on tourism marketing, there is an \$18 return.

But even more convincing are the figures released just this week by the Maryland Office of Tourism Development, an agency of DBED, that show the average length of stay by visitors to Maryland has increased to 2.8 nights — an all-time high. The Office of Tourism Development, working with our industry partners, is developing new products and attractions to drive more visitors to Maryland and encourage them to stay longer.

Maryland has also been positively affected by travelers who choose to drive to their destinations rather than fly, a trend that began shortly after the September 11 tragedy. Maryland's strategic location makes it easy for visitors from surrounding states and even from as far away as New England, Ohio and Florida to spend a few days enjoying the natural beauty that is Maryland.

Led by recently named Assistant Secretary Dennis Castleman, the state's tourism office will step up promotion of the Chesapeake Bay, as well as take a renewed focus on Maryland's role in the Underground Railroad. And the office will continue to work on its immensely popular Civil War Trails program, which currently has two driving trails open, with plans for several more.

I look forward to working closely with the tourism industry through the efforts of the Maryland Office of Tourism Development. We are committed to ensuring that the state's fourth largest industry sector remains competitive and prosperous. As we all know, the state and its communities

depend on a vibrant and healthy tourism economy.

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*Aris Melissaratos is secretary of the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development.*

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