



2026 South Haven Summer Visitation Summary.

Memorial Day through Labor Day

Purpose

This summary provides a high-level look at South Haven visitation during the 2026 summer tourism season using Placer.ai data. The analysis focuses on overall visitation, major holiday and event periods, downtown and beach activity, visitor movement, and visitor origins.

The primary seasonal period runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Because these holidays fall on different dates each year, the 2026 and 2025 seasonal periods are not identical in length. Year-over-year comparisons should therefore be viewed as indicators of overall seasonal activity rather than exact same-day comparisons.

Data Note

Placer.ai provides estimates of visitation based on location analytics. This summary uses visitors as the primary measure whenever visitor data is available and focuses on year-over-year percentage changes rather than raw visitor counts. Some individual property and event reports provide year-over-year changes only for visits.

Overall Summer Visitation

South Haven maintained relatively stable visitation across the broader 2026 summer tourism season.

For the full Memorial Day through Labor Day period, Placer.ai reports that citywide out-of-market visitors increased approximately **1.1% year over year**. While the overall change was modest, individual holiday and event periods varied considerably and provide a more complete picture of the season.

The major summer periods ranged from a **21.6% increase in out-of-market visitors over Memorial Day Weekend**, to a **5.1% decline over Independence Day Weekend**, an approximately **8% decline during National Blueberry Festival**, and a **2.1% increase over Labor Day Weekend**.

That variation reinforces that the summer was not defined by one consistent trend.

Visitor Origins & Behavior

South Haven continued to draw primarily from regional drive markets. Across the broader summer period, Grand Rapids–Kalamazoo–Battle Creek represented the largest share of measured visitation, followed by Chicago, South Bend–Elkhart, Detroit, and Indianapolis.

Across the full Memorial Day–Labor Day period, **Grand Rapids–Kalamazoo–Battle Creek represented approximately 45% of measured visitation**, followed by Chicago at approximately **16%**, South Bend–Elkhart at **11%**, Detroit at **7%**, and Indianapolis at **5%**. The distribution highlights the importance of West Michigan as South Haven’s largest visitor market while also demonstrating the destination’s continued reach into Chicago, northern Indiana, Detroit, and Indianapolis.

Visitor journey data also shows that visitors used South Haven as a multi-stop destination. Downtown and South Beach were particularly connected through Riverfront Park and the lighthouse area, while North Beach showed stronger connections with Stanley Johnston Park, nearby lodging, North Beach Concession,s and Captain Lou's.

Peak Visitation Periods

Memorial Day Weekend opened the season strongly, with out-of-market visitors **increasing approximately 21.6% year over year**. Memorial Day Monday was the highest-activity day in the citywide comparison Memorial Day Weekend and produced especially strong beach activity.

Independence Day Weekend was approximately **5.1% lower year over year** in out-of-market visitors across the full holiday period. However, July 3, coinciding with South Haven’s Light Up the Lake fireworks show, produced the highest visitation day of the summer. Citywide out-of-market visitors **increased approximately 17.2% year over year on July 3rd**, with strong activity also recorded downtown and at both beaches. The difference between the full-weekend and single-day results suggests visitation was more concentrated around the Light Up the Lake Firework Show day.

National Blueberry Festival also showed a mixed pattern. Out-of-market visitors were approximately **8% lower** than during the comparable 2025 festival period citywide. At the same time, activity increased at several locations hosting festival programming, including Riverfront Park, Stanley Johnston Park, and Huron Street Pavilion. Saturday was the strongest visitation day across most locations studied.

Labor Day Weekend closed the season positively, with out-of-market visitors **increasing approximately 2.1% year over year**. Downtown and both beaches also recorded increases in activity, with Saturday and Sunday producing the strongest downtown volumes and Sunday standing out at the beaches.

Taken together, the four periods show a summer with significant peaks and shifts in visitor behavior rather than uniform performance from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Downtown Activity

Downtown visitation remained strong across the full 2026 summer season. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, Central Business District visitors **increased approximately 2.4% year over year**. While overall summer visitation downtown increased, activity varied across individual holidays and events.

Memorial Day Weekend **Central Business District visits were approximately 2.7% lower** than the prior year, even as citywide visitation increased significantly. During National Blueberry Festival, Central Business District visitors declined approximately 7%, although those who visited downtown stayed longer on average than in 2025.

Independence Day provides a particularly strong example of downtown's role during major events. On July 3, Central Business District visits **increased approximately 27.2% year over year**, corresponding with a **17.2% increase in citywide out-of-market visitors** that day. Precipitation fluctuated throughout July 3, and the Placer.ai data shows periods of movement away from South Beach and increased activity within the Central Business District corresponding with periods of rainfall. While the data cannot establish that precipitation directly caused this movement, the timing suggests weather may have influenced how visitors moved through the community during the day.

Downtown also finished the season positively. Central Business District visits **increased approximately 5.1% during Labor Day Weekend** compared with the same four-day holiday period in 2025.

Visitor journey data consistently shows connections between downtown, Riverfront Park, the lighthouse, and the waterfront, suggesting these areas function as interconnected parts of the South Haven visitor experience.

Beach Activity

Beach visitation was one of the more notable components of the 2026 summer season. Across the full Memorial Day–Labor Day period, **North Beach visitors increased 20.6% year over year, while South Beach visitors increased 15.9%**. South Beach continued to attract the larger number of visitors overall, while North Beach experienced the stronger percentage growth.

The two beaches did not always follow the same pattern during individual holidays and events. **Memorial Day Weekend** produced particularly strong beach activity, with North Beach visits increasing approximately **110% year over year** and South Beach visits increasing approximately **2.9%**. On Memorial Day Monday alone, North Beach activity increased approximately **260%** and South Beach approximately **94%**. Weather differences between the two years likely contributed to the unusually strong holiday Monday.

Both beaches also performed strongly on **July 3**, the busiest visitation day of the summer and the date of South Haven's Light Up the Lake fireworks show. North Beach visits increased approximately **23.9%**, while South Beach visits increased approximately **22.8%** compared with July 3, 2025.

The **National Blueberry Festival** produced a different pattern. North Beach visits increased approximately **21%**, while South Beach visits decreased approximately **5%**. Neither beach was a primary festival venue, but festival activity at Riverfront Park resulted in a street closure affecting the Water Street vehicular entrance to South Beach, temporarily reducing normal vehicle access. This provides important context for the difference between the two beaches, although Placer.ai cannot determine whether the access change or other factors caused the variation in activity.

The beaches finished the season strongly during **Labor Day Weekend**, when North Beach visits increased approximately **32.3%** and South Beach visits increased approximately **15.1% year over year**.

The 2026 season also marked the return of lifeguards to South Beach for the first time in more than 20 years, while North Beach remained unguarded. South Beach operated with lifeguards and associated safety rules and enforcement, including differences in rules governing flotation devices, while North Beach remained unguarded. These operational differences, along with weather, events, calendar timing and beach access, provide useful context when interpreting the different visitation patterns. Placer.ai cannot determine whether lifeguard presence, beach rules, access changes, visitor preferences or other factors caused those differences.

Key Takeaway

Overall, South Haven experienced a stable summer tourism season in 2026, with Placer.ai reporting **out-of-market visitors approximately 1.1% higher** year over year from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Within the season, several patterns stand out. **July 3 was the busiest visitation day** of the summer, coinciding with South Haven's Light Up the Lake fireworks show and demonstrating the significant visitor activity associated with one of the community's signature summer events.

Beach activity was another important part of the 2026 story. **Across the full Memorial Day–Labor Day period, visitors increased 20.6% at North Beach and 15.9% at South Beach.** North Beach experienced the stronger percentage growth, while South Beach remained the higher-volume beach and operated with lifeguards for the first time in more than 20 years. Differences in access, events, weather, and the visitor experience at each beach provide important context, but the data does not establish any one factor as the cause of those differences.

Taken together, the data shows that overall summer visitation remained steady and slightly above 2025 levels, while major events and increased beach activity helped shape when and where visitors spent their time in South Haven.