

## Knocked out of bounds

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### Room shortage in host city Jacksonville could leave some attendees of Super Bowl far afield

By Robert Johnson, Globe Correspondent | January 25, 2005

Diehard New England Patriots fan Randy Pierce is worried about becoming homeless. Not in his hometown of Nashua but in Jacksonville, Fla., at Super Bowl XXXIX.

"I have been researching this, and most rooms within an hour's drive or so are booked," says Pierce, 38. He's considering an offer to stay with friends in Tampa, a three-hour drive south from Alltel Stadium, site of the Feb. 6 game. Another possibility: There are plenty of hotel rooms in Atlanta, four hours by car to the north.

Finding quarters closer to the kickoff will be tougher than the traditional tussle for pillow space during the Super Bowl. That's because Jacksonville, located in northeast Florida near the Georgia border, is the smallest city ever to host the Super Bowl. Even though the city is in tourist-friendly Florida, it isn't among the Sunshine State's traditional tourism destinations and has only 15,000 hotel rooms.

Sleeping space is so scarce that five cruise ships are being docked in the St. Johns River, which runs through downtown, to add another 3,600 rooms. But don't even try booking them: All are already reserved for the National Football League officials and their corporate guests, largely executives from such major advertisers as Frito-Lay, Pepsi, Motorola, and Visa.

Initially, Jacksonville fell 3,000 hotel rooms short of the NFL's requirement to offer a minimum of 17,500, but the league awarded the big game to the small market after it agreed to bring in cruise ships to make up the difference. For Jacksonville, the Super Bowl is expected to have an overall economic impact of \$300 million.

Even with the cruise-ship innovation, the number of expected visitors — 150,000 — is daunting. The attendee total is predicted to be so big in part because of what may seem to be a logistical contradiction: Jacksonville's Alltel Stadium, which can hold 83,000 fans, has a larger seating capacity than the arenas in most of the 11 cities that have previously hosted a Super Bowl game.

So on land and sea alike, all of the rooms in Jacksonville are booked, and there's a rush for the rest of the rooms in the region, according to officials of the Jacksonville Super Bowl Host Committee.

Yesterday, Patrick Duncan, director of lodging and accommodations for the host committee, disclosed that his group has 2,500 hotel rooms that it had been saving for fans from the two cities whose teams will be playing.

"This is the last of the last," said Duncan.

If, and it's a big if, hotels receive some cancellations and resell the rooms now, Duncan said, he expects prices in the downtown area to be as high as \$600 a night. That's two to three times the going rate for hotel rooms in Houston and New Orleans during the last two Super Bowls attended by the Patriots.

Thus Jacksonville appears to be a landlord's dream market, temporarily.

"There is about to be a magic moment when thousands of football fans are desperately seeking a room here," said Randy Cooper, president of [www.superbullrentalsbyowner.com](http://www.superbullrentalsbyowner.com), one of several companies that are busily signing up the owners of houses and condominiums who are willing to vacate them for a few days if the rent is right.

Cooper has more than 100 home-owning clients signed up and expects to more than triple that number this week as word of the room shortage spreads and the fans' frenzy to find a place builds. The expectations of would-be landlords are high.

Angela and Steve Hawley are among those who have paid \$400 to advertise their four-bedroom Jacksonville house on Cooper's website. They're asking \$4,000 a day with a four-night minimum stay. Best case, they're hoping, would be \$20,000 for one week, while they vacation in Aruba.

But all prices are negotiable, and it's very much a renter-beware market, said Walter L. Williams Jr., president of the local Coldwell Banker real estate office and the host committee's official apartment rental agent.

"Some of the asking prices may seem unreasonable. Everybody got hyped up for a while, but some of our clients have reduced their rates," he said.

Williams' clients have 1,400 houses and condo units for rent. As of last week, only about 50 places had been rented. By yesterday afternoon, Williams said he had rented about 150 homes.

But the best strategy is to wait until the last few days, says Pierce, the Patriots fan in Nashua.

"I have seen room shortages and high prices at other Super Bowls in Houston last year and New Orleans in 2002," said Pierce. "A lot of people who have deposits on hotel rooms will back out, even though they'll lose the money, because they made reservations long before they knew who would be playing."

Maybe, but some travel agents say such cancellations may be offset by a last-minute surge of reservations from fans who found out Sunday that their team is playing. Consider that a week ago Boston travel agent Eddie Marsden of Netc Fawke Travel had only one confirmed Super Bowl customer: "And he was from Philadelphia."

Fans can always hope the rental market in Jacksonville crashes the way it did in San Diego in 2003 for Super Bowl XXXVII. In the months before that game, asking prices for two-bedroom condo rentals reached \$65,000 a week.

But reality set in after the two teams turned out to be the Oakland Raiders, whose fans were able to find much cheaper housing along the highways between the two California cities, and the Buccaneers of Tampa Bay, a relatively small market that had experienced its own Super Bowl thrill by hosting the game in 2001.

Patriots fan Karen Cardoza is counting on people from other cities canceling their trips and creating hotel availability.

"All those sad Steelers fans will be staying home now," said the special education teacher, who lives in Providence. But one way or another, she insisted, "I'm going. Even if I have to sleep in my car."