

Miami hopes Zika will not spook tourists

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The official line from ground zero in America's first homegrown Zika outbreak is this: relax, everything is under control.

But it's hard not to be jittery when some restaurants put cans of bug repellent on the tables.

The epicenter of the nation's first locally transmitted cases of Zika—as opposed to cases stemming from travel to Zika-affected areas overseas—is a one-square-mile part of a popular arts and restaurant district known as Wynwood. Fifteen cases have been reported.

Despite the upbeat tone from city officials, who note that the affected area has been fumigated thoroughly, some businesses are taking no chances.

Grace Della, founder of Miami Culinary Tours, has halted her food crawls for now out of concern for the safety of employees and visitors.

"Right now I count more than 90 people that rescheduled the tours. So you can imagine it for more businesses, that's a big hit," said Della.

US health authorities issued a travel warning Monday for the affected part of Wynwood, urging pregnant women not to go there.

The virus is known to cause the birth defect microcephaly, in which babies are born with unusually small heads and brains.

That alert prompted Wynwood Yard, a cultural center that hosts concerts and outdoor activities and features restaurants, to shut down, too.

But other merchants, who work indoors with air conditioning that keeps the bugs away, said the culinary tour firm and the cultural center are isolated cases.

"Those are different kinds of businesses, that operate outdoors," said Joaquin Cintron, manager of a hair salon called Razzle Dazzle.

"What is more, people are reacting positively," he added.

Cintron's shop—with tapestries, vintage sofas, and a checkerboard tile floor—is a postcard of Wynwood: a gentrifying neighborhood where hip millennials rub elbows with low-income people on rundown streets that still boast art galleries.

So Wynwood is part of the city's tourism route. But it is too early to say if the Zika outbreak will hurt the tourism industry.

Miami authorities are bending over backwards to keep panic and the Zika outbreak from spreading.

"As long as everybody takes the proper precautions, there is no need for any sort of panic that we will have an actual economic effect," said Ken Russell, a member of the Miami city council from a ward that includes part of the Zika-hit area.

Under control

In fact, the news media can be the main source of damage, said Carolin Lusby, assistant professor at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Florida International University.

She cited as examples the impact that Ebola and swine flu had on tourism.

"Negative hype does have a negative economic impact" but things eventually go back to normal, she told AFP.

"I definitely think the word is out and people are changing travel plans, due to the generalization effect that this could impact all of Florida or the southern US, too," Lusby said.

She noted, however, that the World Health Organization has not issued any restriction for Miami.

So local authorities insist that Florida is, as Governor Rick Scott said Monday, "safe and open for business."

Miami-Dade County fumigated the affected area of Wynwood on the ground and from the air. It hands out bug spray to visitors, and has a web page where people can report instances of standing water where Zika-carrying mosquitos like to breed.

Hammering away at the message of business as usual, Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado said, "I think Wynwood now is the safest place in South Florida because they've fumigated."

Still, an AFP reporter experienced how the mosquitos are still biting pretty hard in Wynwood.

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