

Sierra-at-Tahoe content as lone resort in owner's portfolio

By Kathryn Reed

Schussing down the slopes of Sierra-at-Tahoe it's hard to tell anything is different this season. And that's exactly what resort officials want.

Less than a month before the South Shore resort opened Nov. 23 for the 2010-11 season, its sister resort, Northstar-at-Tahoe, was acquired by Vail Resorts. (CNL Lifestyle Properties still owns the land and lifts; it's the management rights that the Colorado company bought.)

Sierra has noticed some of its guests are different this season. This is because the acquisition allowed this year's Heavenly Mountain Resort (also a Vail property) season passholders to ski at Sierra.



John Rice

"We certainly appreciate the extra business. I think we have made some people happy who didn't know what we are all about," John Rice, Sierra's general manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

A couple from the Sacramento area on Feb. 6 said they knew about the sale, but thought Vail had bought Sierra, too. They were relieved to learn Sierra is being left alone.

Sierra's day care has seen an influx of patrons, mainly parents with Heavenly passes. Retail sales patterns have changed with the newcomers, too.

"They ran a special for Heavenly passholders. We sold a ton of helmets that were sitting around," Rice said.

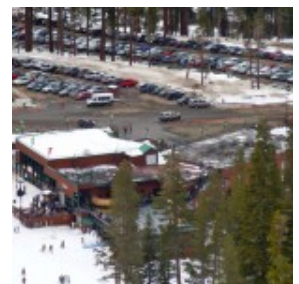
Food sales are the same with the newbies, but beverage consumption is up.

"They like our pricing in the bar. The bartenders like it because they tip well," Rice said.

Despite the influx of skiers and boarders, the parking lot and slopes have not been inundated – which was a concern of Sierra's. On Super Bowl Sunday it wasn't crazy. It was a different story on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, but that Monday is traditionally a busy day – especially when it's warm enough for short-sleeves at the Tiki Bar.

"We are doing better than last year and last year was a great year," Rice said. "We've always been a good little cash cow. In a good year our margins are phenomenal; in a bad year we break even."

At one time, Booth Creek owned 11 ski resorts. It's down to one – Sierra.



Sierra-at-Tahoe is the last resort its parent

company owns.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

In 1946, Vern Sprock opened what was then called Sierra Ski Ranch. The resort moved to its present location in 1968. In 1993, the Fibreboard Corporation bought it. Three years later Booth Creek acquired it and changed the name to Sierra-at-Tahoe.

Rice is not worried Booth Creek will unload Sierra. He said there's always speculation and rumor, but nothing is on the horizon that he has been made aware of.

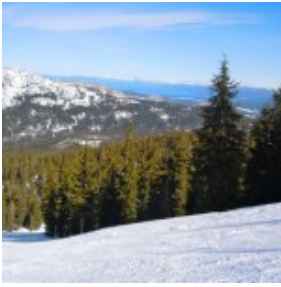
He knew about the Vail-Northstar transaction before it was signed.

"I got a call from the owner before the deal was completed. He said, 'I have full confidence in you. (Sierra) has been a strong performer. We're looking forward to another great year'," Rice said.

Rice acknowledges a few bumps occurred early in the season – mostly surrounding what days passes were valid and where people could pick them up. Signs had to be changed that mentioned the Double Whammy pass (a Sierra-Northstar pass that went away with the sale).

Season passes picked up in December still have both resorts on it even though it's not good at both.

It's in the offices at the resort near Echo Summit where change has been most noticeable. Four full time (PR, sales, accounting) and one part time position (human resources) have been added. This is because some of those jobs were shared with Northstar.



Views of Lake Tahoe from a rare groomed Castle run on Feb. 6.

Vertical Plus, the program that allows riders to use a special line for an extra fee, will be looked at in the off-season because it was tied together with Northstar. The loyalty program will also likely be revamped to reflect a Sierra-only culture starting next season.

Rice isn't ruling out any possibilities for what might be in store for Sierra.

"We'll continue to talk to Vail and see if they want to do something going forward (with season passes) and we'll consider what else is out there," Rice said. But he stressed, right now, "No negotiating is taking place."

What will Sierra-at-Tahoe in 2011-12 be like? That answer is an unknown, but Rice and company are working on it.