

Vail Resorts spending millions to upgrade its ski resorts

By Kathryn Reed

Vail Resorts plans to spend \$83 million to \$90 million in the upcoming building season on its six ski resorts in California and Colorado. Exactly how much of that will come to Heavenly or Northstar is not being disclosed per company policy.

However, during a March 12 media tour of both resorts, the men in charge of the respective resorts divulged some nuggets.

Although prices will not be disclosed until today, Heavenly Mountain Resort General Manager Pete Sonntag said two passes for 2011-12 would allow skiers to ride at Heavenly and Northstar-at-Tahoe – the Epic Local and the Tahoe Value.



Dylan exchanges his snowboard for a tub at Heavenly.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

This season people who bought a Heavenly pass could ski at Northstar and Sierra-at-Tahoe per an agreement of the sale of

Northstar from Booth Creek (which still owns Sierra) to Vail Resorts. Sierra will not be part of the pass equation for the 2011-12 season.

Sonntag, whose background is ski school, plans to elevate the experience for people taking lessons.

“We’re going to get rid of the yurts. We are going to build a new ski school facility,” Sonntag said. “That starts to complete the picture up here.”

He was referencing all the changes near the top of the gondola, including the Tamarack Lodge that opened this season.

Russ Pecoraro, spokesman for Heavenly, said the lodge near the lift with the same name was just what the resort needed and is doing a brisk business. This was Heavenly’s first new lodge in 30 years.

A smoker using black walnut and cherry wood has been installed. A lunch for less special, like other Vail properties, has been instituted. The interior, especially where food is purchased, has the feel of Two Elk at Vail and Spruce Saddle at Beaver Creek.

Bob Offerle, general manager of Tamarack Lodge, knows how to take care of vegetarians because he is one. The veggie melt with its roasted green chilis and sautéed mushrooms is one of the big sellers. Most days a vegetarian chili is also available.

Something different at this lodge compared to others in the industry is a free refill on coffee, hot cocoa and soda.

“It’s not just a great building, you have to have great product,” Sonntag said.

The lodge will be open year-round, but closed in May and October. This coincides with when the gondola is taken offline for maintenance.

Other improvements at Heavenly for next season include installing more snowmaking and lift maintenance. Two trails off the Galaxy lift will be created.

Although replacing the Galaxy chair is in the master plan, Sonntag would not give a date when the two-seater would be upgraded.

Nor would he speculate when the California Lodge would be revamped. What will make that dramatically different is lodging will be a component of it.

Heavenly is not waiting for a recreation bill in Congress to be passed for it to move forward with creating more summer experiences for guests. Although the winter tubing hill will be open while folks from the Tour of California cycling event are in town in mid-May, a summer tubing hill will be created. Essentially, plastic matting is used instead of snow.

It costs \$30 an hour to tube, plus the \$32 gondola ride. Newbies to the sport, if one can call tubing a sport, seemed to be converts after experiencing the thrill of whirling down the slick white stuff Saturday.

For Vail Resorts' California resorts, Northstar will be experiencing the most upgrades – a lift, lodge and runs. *Lake Tahoe News* will bring readers specifics about those improvements in a future story.

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