

Sunny weather launches tourism season in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

It's Day 3 – or at least it's forecasted to be. Day 3 of sunshine that is. Day 3 of feeling like summer might have arrived in Lake Tahoe before the calendar says it's supposed to. The National Weather Service expects it will hit 71 in South Lake Tahoe on Monday.

That's good news for a region that disagrees with economists who say the recession is over. Just look at the near 17 percent unemployment rate in South Lake Tahoe, the vacancy signs on hotels, the empty parking lots and abandoned storefronts.



The Tahoe Queen will race the M.S. Dixie II on Labor Day weekend.

Photo/LTN file

Summer is Lake Tahoe's bread and butter season. It was beginning to seem more like burnt toast after the dusting of snow covered the ground throughout the basin on Monday and May being more gray sky than blue, which turned the Amgen Tour de California into a bust for Lake Tahoe and Memorial Day one not

to remember.

But when things start heating up in Sacramento – it's supposed to be in the 80s today and higher going forward – those Central Valley dwellers start thinking of cooler climates. Tahoe is often that perfect spot to get-away to.

Lake Tahoe Basin tourism officials are hoping word from the Leisure Travel Summit in New York last week will come to fruition. U.S. residents are expected to travel more this summer compared to a year ago, according to experts from Best Western, AAA and the U.S. Travel Association.

At the annual summit, Best Western reported advance reservations for peak summer travel up more than 4 percent at its U.S. hotels.

On the South Shore, hoteliers are also saying summer bookings are better than a year ago. And for an industry that has seen advance booking become a rarity and the last-minute reservation more the norm, this is a welcome change.

Despite gas prices hovering at about \$4 a gallon in Tahoe and just less than that elsewhere, AAA predicts 85 to 90 percent of Americans will travel by vehicle this summer.

All of this could bode well for Tahoe, which despite trying to be a destination market for people with fat wallets, is still reliant on the drive-up market.

This is evident with Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority spending the bulk of its advertising dollars on the Sacramento and Bay Area markets.

Carol Chaplin, LTVA executive director, told *Lake Tahoe News* it is seeing success with the two television ads that are aired during San Francisco Giants games. They are on cable and network channels, but the Giants games are where they are doing the best.

One TV ad is based on a Japanese game show that shows two guys with pantyhose on their heads, which then leads to the same old visuals of the South Shore. The other lead-in is two boxing chins. The tagline on both is "Get your vacation on."

That's the same campaign Duncan/Channon of San Francisco came up with for summer 2010.

"The idea of both is to catch your attention. They are weird and stop you," Chaplin said.

Radio stations in the Sacramento and Bay Area markets have been airing ads since mid-May that the LTVA is paying for. Soon those ads will be replaced with promos touting the American Century Celebrity Golf Tournament, which is July 12-17 in Stateline. Then the regular ads will be broadcast until just past Labor Day.

What is new this Labor Day is a return to having the three-day weekend be more than just a fireworks show that Sunday.

Tourism officials on Thursday made the rounds to the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association and Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority meetings to tout what is hoped to be a culinary extravaganza on land and water.

A winemaker dinner aboard the Tahoe Queen and M.S. Dixie II paddle-wheelers will start the fun Sept. 2, with a race between the two boats the next day.

For the past several years the boat race has been in June – in what was dubbed Opening Days Lake Tahoe. That event has been scrubbed from events lists. In the early 1990s Labor Day Lake Tahoe featured the race between the two boats and had events throughout that weekend as a way to keep locals entertained and put heads in beds.

Tourism officials are going back to that line of thinking – making that weekend be full of fun.

Also on Sept. 3 will be Viva Valhalla, a celebration of Tahoe's Latino culture on Ski Run Boulevard from 10am-5pm.

On the Sunday of Labor Day will be the second annual Sample the Sierra. That night is the annual fireworks show.

But the fireworks are expected to be better and cost LTVA less money. The same goes for the Fourth of July event.

While Pyro Spectaculars is still putting on the show, the music choreographer has been fired and Jerry Bindel, LTVA board member, will be helping coordinate that aspect of the pyrotechnic display.

Mike Frye, who handles special events for the tourism agency, negotiated the rate from \$10,000 a minute to \$6,000 for the fireworks. The July 4 display will have about 23 minute of fireworks or 1 minute longer than last year, while the Labor Day show is a few minutes less – which is always the case.

Lodging association board members said much discussion was had in January with the LTVA about whether the July 4 fireworks should be moved to July 3 so they would be on a Sunday. Mixed and heated emotions rose to the surface about whether that would be unpatriotic, would tourists be confused if the date were changed, and what is the best option for increasing room nights.

Ultimately, it was decided July 4 fireworks should happen on July 4.