

Heavenly evolving into year-round playground

By Kathryn Reed

A playground of a different kind is mapped out for the area surrounding Tamarack Lodge at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

Of the \$25 million Vail Resorts will be spending in the coming months on summer recreation plans at its California and Colorado resorts, it is not being revealed how much is going into Heavenly.

Construction on two rope courses, a canopy tour and zipline center is slated to begin in mid-June. It's likely some of this will be open in August. All should be ready for the ski season. And if the weather cooperates, most of these amenities will be accessible year-round.



Pete Sonntag, Heavenly's general manager, points to where the amphitheater for weddings will go off the mid-station gondola deck.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Stakes are in the ground at the various locations outlining the various courses. Even though measurable snow is on the

ground at the top of the gondola, Heavenly General Manager Pete Sonntag doesn't anticipate this being a hindrance to starting work.

On a tour of the project site Thursday, Sonntag stopped at the mid-station of the gondola to point out where an amphitheater for weddings and other special events will be constructed on the southeast side of the walkway in the woods.

"It will be all natural stone with terraces built in. It will be rustic," Sonntag said.

It's possible interpretive talks will take place there, with a hike to follow from the top of the gondola.

Wedding guests and others will have a view of Lake Tahoe. After the ceremony, everyone would get back on gondola for the reception at Tamarack Lodge.

The lodge will be expanded in the back this summer to allow for more storage. Sonntag said with the dining facility exceeding expectations and now being the No. 4 producing restaurant of the entire company, storage has been an issue. (It opened in December 2010.)

As for the gondola, the resort is in the middle of a four-year project to replace the windows of each car.

Ed Cook, who owns a tree service by the same name, was riding the gondola May 23 to look for hazardous trees. The goal is to take ones out before they could take out the gondola line.

New amenities

A four-line zipline called the Zip Flyer will be accessed from the Easy Rider lift. The mini-climbing wall that had been nearby will go where the umbrella bar used to reside.



A rope course will be built in the boulders behind the signs.

The zipline will be about 1,000-feet-long – nearly one-third the length of the Heavenly Flyer that was taken out after someone riding the Tamarack Chairlift died after being struck by a zipliner. That 2009 incident is still not completely resolved.

One day the resort would like to have a longer zipline.

(At 3,100 feet, the old zipline when built in 2008 was the longest in the lower 48 states; it took 60 seconds to ride.)

The one that will be built this summer is considered more of an introductory zipline. The landing platform is near the north side of Tamarack Lodge.

The Discovery Forest Canopy Tour is slated to be fun and educational, as well as kid-friendly. It will be in front of the lodge between the kids' ski school building and the Tamarack Chairlift.

The Black Bear Challenge will be just above that in the area now used in the winter for children's ski school through Black Bear Hollow. Winter use of the challenge course is still being discussed.

It will be more of a straight line and rectangular.



Crews are getting the Adventure Peak area ready for the summer season.

One of the rope courses will be 15 feet off the ground, the other 30. People are harnessed on each one. They will be designed in a manner that the course can be as challenging as the participant wants it to be. Various ages from varying physical abilities will be able to access the apparatuses.

The other rope course is Boulder Cove Challenge. This area is behind the sign at the base of the gondola stairs where the boulder field is. This will be a self-guided challenge course with vertical wood columns, ropes, bridges and platforms.

Pricing for everything remains an unknown. Package deals are likely.

Down the road

Vail Resorts has said it wants to spend \$100 million in the next few years developing summer recreation at what were originally just ski resorts. Vail and Breckenridge are also getting upgrades this summer, as is Northstar.

With the U.S. Forest Service owning most of the land Heavenly sits on, it must sign off on new uses and infrastructure, and even tree felling. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has a say in most things, too. But a portion of Heavenly is outside the Lake Tahoe Basin. That area is where mountain biking might one day be allowed. But to get there it would require going up the gondola.

For now, mountain biking at Heavenly is something that is just being talked about.

A plot of land to the left of the gondola stairs (when descending) is where a climbing wall five times the size of the current one is slated to go. Preliminary designs include 18 routes, with the base to mimic Sierra granite. It would be a permanent structure. That, too, requires USFS approval.

Expanded hiking is in the works – just not this year. One day a single-track trail to the top of East Peak is likely.

To date, the Forest Service has signed off on specific items that are in the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act of 2011 and nothing more.

This summer

The gondola is running this long weekend for scenic excursions. It will operate seven days a week beginning June 14 from 10am-4pm, with seasonal closure in October.

The climbing wall, tubing hill and hiking will be open this summer as they have been in past years. And the Tamarack Lodge will be open with food service.

Heavenly bans all types of burning during the summer. This includes cigarette smoking and barbecuing.