

Tourists returning to Tahoe reviving economy

By Kathryn Reed

“No vacancy” signs, traffic on the roads midweek, parking lots full. All of these are indicators of an economy that is on the rebound.

There are days, construction aside, when one cannot drive as fast they would like. Even the increase in bikes and pedestrians is slowing down the normal pace.



Beaches like the one at Lake Shore Lodge are always full for the July 4 fireworks.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

It hasn't been this way in Tahoe since before the recession.

According to the Bureau of Economic analysis, spending on travel and tourism in the United States is up 6.8 percent in the first three months of this year compared to a year ago.

A report by Dean Runyan Associates said more than 200 million people came to California in 2012 as tourists. Collectively, they spent about \$106.4 billion. This is an increase of 3 percent from the \$101.8 billion that was spent in 2011.

Pat Ronan, who owns Lake Shore Lodge and Spa in South Lake Tahoe, said everyone he's talked to – from casinos to vacation rentals – is doing better than years past.

“We sell out every year, but this year it was a month in advance,” Ronan, who is also chairman of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, told *Lake Tahoe News* of this weekend.

The three- and four-night minimums that many hotels have for this weekend were not a deterrent.

“There is a huge amount of family business because now the whole family can afford to do it,” Ronan said.

Sandy Evans Hall, North Lake Tahoe Resort Association executive director, said 2012 was a great summer for her area and this summer is tracking to be on par or better.

“Probably our biggest increase now is showing up in September because of Iron Man, Tough Mudder and the food and wine festival,” Hall told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The first two are new events to the North Shore.

Events continue to be an economic boon no matter where they are.

Carol Chaplin, LTVA's executive director, said events do two things. One, they draw people to that specific event, and the other is the event creates a sense of energy, that Tahoe is a happening place even if that particular event is not of interest or the person can't make it that day.

Fourth of July is traditionally the busiest time of the year throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin. This year is no different. Beaches were full of fireworks enthusiasts last night. The beach at Lake Shore Lodge and Spa was a mass of people with their eyes focused intently on the 25-minute fireworks display that featured 3,500 shells being shot off from three barges.

Tourist officials on the South Shore had predicted upward of 100,000 people could be in town this weekend.

The big difference this year compared to previous years is the advance bookings. The past few years people were all about last-minute travel, now they are planning. This is a sign of confidence in the economy.

Lodging is the first segment of a tourism destination to come back. Then people start eating out more and graduate to more expensive eateries. Then it's a special event they can afford. Finally, it will be the truly optional items people will open their wallets for – like spa treatments, helicopter rides and shopping.

“For the boats, they are pacing well above where they were last year,” Teri Sweeney with Aramark said of the two paddle-wheelers and 50-passenger Paradise her company operates.

On the Fourth, a third cruise was added for the Paradise. It sold out in 1½ weeks. All of the cruises were sold out yesterday.

Sweeney added that the boat rental business is doing well, too.

People are eating out as well.

“Last year was a record year for Riva, Gar Wood and Bar of America. This year is proving to be as good or better, even in Kings Beach (at Caliente),” Tom Turner told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Turner owns the four restaurants scattered about the greater Lake Tahoe area.

July 3 is traditionally the busiest day for Gar Wood because people are stopping there on their way to the fireworks in Kings Beach. Riva Grill in South Lake and Caliente in Kings Beach are popular viewing platforms on fireworks night.

“People are definitely loosening up, but it is much more calculated these days,” Chaplin said. She doubts the visitor who has money to throw will be returning any time soon, but is confident the tide has turned.