

# Sierra transforms base area into event venue



The new structure on the left, which has a restaurant and retail, will open in mid-January. Photos/Kathryn Reed

**By Susan Wood**

TWIN BRIDGES – Snowboarders aren't the only ones sitting on their bottoms enjoying all that the slopes of Sierra-at-Tahoe have to offer.

The South Shore-area ski resort located 12 miles west of Meyers has kicked off the 2013-14 season with a new twist and turn – a major \$5 million overhaul to its base lodge area that includes a plaza, new eatery and associated amenities designed to accommodate hanging out.

The resort started construction as soon as the last season ended.

“The mountain is incredible. We don’t want to change the mountain. We just wanted to do something that would enhance the overall ski and riding experience,” Sierra-at-Tahoe spokesman Steve Hemphill said, as he strolled through a massive expanse of paving stones now covering the area outside the main base lodge.



Richard Baker works on the Solstice restaurant at Sierra.

No longer should seating be an issue.

Two fire pits, a structure for an informational sign, lighting, fencing and a 9,000-square-foot building mark an area that used to be covered in dirt or snow. The improvements have greatly increased the number of seats available for those who don’t want to leave the ski area after playing on the slopes and for those who just want to people-watch or wait for others.

Sierra-at-Tahoe, still run under the management of Booth Creek Holdings, wants to expand into new markets – weddings, concerts and events. Three concerts that could simulate the Live at Lakeview series at South Lake Tahoe’s El Dorado Beach are planned in March in cooperation with Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and OnCourse Events.

Also look for the plaza to be turned into a massive venue for a corn-hole tournament.

And when the Cal Band from Berkeley arrives for its annual pilgrimage to Sierra-at-Tahoe on Jan. 19 during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday it will have a suitable place to stand and perform. This is the same weekend the new food-retail outlet on the plaza is set to open.

Events and parties represent part of the missing elements Sierra-at-Tahoe has wanted to capitalize on for years, but didn't have the full monetary resources to pull it off. When it ran Northstar, Booth Creek tended to pile the money into improvements to the north before Vail Resorts took over the Truckee-area ski area.

Sierra wanted a little breathing room inside and out of its base area where 90 percent of its visitors pass through. Getting in on the act, the Aspen Café and Mama's Kitchen in the base lodge were also opened up to accommodate more seating. Charging areas have been added for people who need to stay connected or do some work while at the resort.

"It's a vast improvement. This will be the après ski experience we've never had," Hemphill told *Lake Tahoe News*. "When you pay \$84 (for a lift ticket), you expect certain things. That's how the Vails of the world do a great job."

However, Sierra isn't anything like Vail – and doesn't want to be. Within minutes of discussing how the improvements are a result of guest surveys, Hemphill confirmed the ski resort would not be the type of resort to put in hotel. That's not its style. But Sierra wouldn't mind if guests stayed after 4pm.



Paving stones are in the plaza, above the 14-foot wall, as well as in front of the ski rental area.

With chairlift technology constantly evolving, new lifts are in the master plan it shares with the landlord, the U.S. Forest Service. But lifts won't be in new locations. A mountain bike park is not likely, but adventure races are.

So how does a small ski resort compete with the high-dollar, fancier ski areas of the world when they're constantly adding new venues or improvements?

"We compete with the big guns by sticking to our guns. We're not looking to compete. We're just giving (people) the product they expect and enhanced it," Hemphill said.

The new restaurant will be called Solstice. It's designed to appeal to guests wanting healthier options and more local representation. These include the Hope Valley Café near Pickett's Junction and Jack Russell Brewery near Placerville, along with other wine-tasting options in the El Dorado County region. There will be seating inside and out of Solstice, and a bar outside. The retail space of the structure, which took much negotiation with the county building department to nail down, will feature the ski area's partners to provide them with more marketing offerings.

The new place is a Sprung design that's similar to an airport

hangar. It's similar to the one at the West Bowl, only larger. This is where the last, large-scale improvement was made at Sierra for the 2003-04 season.

The plaza took out the shack for ski waxing and storage and moved the features to a tent on the lower level.

Long-term goals have the ski area eyeing improvements to its children's ski school. After all, skiers and riders who grew up skiing this mountain have known greatness. Who can forget the two Travis's skiing the slopes – Cabral and Ramos. Now all one has to do is look at the cast of young Olympians aiming for a shot at a gold medal. Some have already achieved it. Take snowboarding gold-medalist Hannah Teter who calls Sierra her host mountain near her Meyers home. Now there's Jamie Anderson and Maddie Bowman likely on their way to Olympic stardom.

The resort hopes to erect a jumbo screen on the plaza during the Olympics in February so people can watch Sierra's stars in action.