

Survey: Families a growing segment of tourism

By Scott Sonner, AP

Visitors to the Reno-Lake Tahoe area stayed longer, spent more money and brought their children along more often last year than they did two years earlier, according to a new tourism survey that suggests targeting families in future marketing efforts.

The tourists with kids spent more than groups with only adults and stayed nearly twice as long in 2013 – averaging 6.2 days compared to 3.2 days, officials for the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority said Thursday.

While gambling “remains the core visitor activity, other events and activities are drawing visitors and their dollars,” concludes a report on the survey being presented Thursday to the authority’s board of directors.

“Families are identified in the data as an exciting opportunity for growth. More adults brought their children with them to the area compared with 2011. They stayed longer, spent more and left wanting to return,” it said.

The share of families traveling with children under age 21 increased from 27 percent in 2011 to 35 percent last year. On average, they spent \$773 while adults-only visitors spent \$637, the survey found.

“It not only shows that the region is doing a phenomenal job of retaining loyal customers, but it also proves that the message of Reno-Tahoe as a family friendly destination is drawing a new group of multigenerational visitors,” said Christopher Baum, the visitor authority’s president and CEO.

Individual visitor spending increased 9 percent to \$685 last year, about one-third of that on gambling. About one-fifth of them came for the day and didn't stay overnight. Those who stayed averaged 4.3 days in 2013, up from 3.5 in 2011.

Carlton Geer, president and CEO of the JA Nugget hotel-casino in Sparks, said the results are consistent with the private market research affiliates of Global Gaming & Hospitality conducted before purchasing the former John Ascuaga's Nugget late last year.

"Our research showed the economy was improving in Northern California, the Reno-Sparks area's main feeder market," said Geer, who has launched a \$50 million renovation of the casino with two hotel towers. He said Northern California's economic outlook is the "single best indicator of future success" in the Reno-Sparks area.

Seattle-based EMC Research conducted the Internet-based survey of 2,000 visitors to Washoe County in 2013. Although they also could have visited other parts of Lake Tahoe, to be included in the survey they must have visited within the month prior the North Shore towns of Incline Village or Crystal Bay, or Reno or Sparks.

For the first time among Californians, visitation from Los Angeles equaled visitation from the San Francisco Bay Area – 31 percent from L.A. and 32 percent from the Bay Area, which is within the survey's margin of error of plus or minus 2.2 percent. Two years ago 27 percent came from L.A. Tourism authority spokesman Ben McDonald said Thursday they still are sifting through the data to pinpoint the reason for that uptick.

The biggest visitor "types" remain gamblers (20 percent) and those visiting family and friends (17 percent), followed by about 12 percent each for recreation, sightseeing vacation and vacation in general.

Overall the survey concluded half visited primarily for “fun” (vacation/recreation). Those who do visit mainly to gamble are the biggest spenders as a group, averaging \$1,049 in 2013, while those in the “fun” category spent \$659.

Rick Murdock, vice president of casino marketing at the Eldorado Resort Casino in Reno, said it reflects their guests' increased interests in outdoor recreation and entertainment.

Eighty-two percent of the visitors surveyed said they had a good or excellent experience. Half said they definitely will return and another quarter said it was very likely.