

Summer is the new winter at ski resorts



Heavenly will be expanding its summer specific activities this year. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

By Megan Michelson, Outdoor

With shrinking visitor numbers and low-snow seasons afflicting ski areas around the West, resort owners are realizing that attracting wintertime guests alone isn't enough to survive.

The impetus for the change came in 2011, when President Obama signed a bill, sponsored by then Colorado Sen. Mark Udall, which amended a previous law from the 1980s that restricted

ski areas on Forest Service land from offering any recreation besides skiing. The amendment, called the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act, allowed resorts to provide summer activities like zip lines, mountain bike parks, Frisbee golf, and ropes courses, so long as they were in harmony with the natural environment. (Water slides, big roller coasters, and golf courses are still prohibited.)

A series of dismal winters followed, and resorts once known as snowy epicenters rapidly started changing their business plans. Squaw Valley has proposed building an indoor-outdoor recreation center, complete with climbing walls and ziplines, that would turn its winter village into a year-round destination.

Vail Ski Resort has operated at a loss during the summer months, according to its fiscal documents, but it has a new strategy to close that gap: this summer, it's launching a program dubbed Epic Discovery that will boost summer offerings like ropes courses, an alpine coaster on elevated rails, and hiking trails with educational signage. The program will also debut at other Vail Resorts properties, including Heavenly Mountain Resort this summer and Breckenridge Ski Resort in 2017.

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