

Travel conference redefines South Shore's image

By Terra Breeden

Glasses of bacon bloody Mary's and craft beers clanged together in salutations while a disc jockey spun pop hits over a booming sound system. Guests shook their tail feathers on the dance floor and enjoyed a vast buffet of pork belly sliders, veggie platters, and pizza slices. Needless to say, it was a party. But this wasn't your everyday Heavenly fiesta, this was the 2018 Mountain Travel Symposium, the largest ski business conference in the world and the meeting ground for many of the industry's top leaders.

This year, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority hosted the Mountain Travel Symposium; a gathering of professionals from ski resorts and mountain towns across the globe. Ski business-people representing more than 35 countries met with vacation home suppliers, buyers and vendors to boost the mountain-travel economy and create lasting connections within the industry. More than 1,000 people attended the event from April 8-14, which was at Harrah's Lake Tahoe, Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel and Heavenly Mountain Resort.

"It's all the people involved in the mountain and winter agencies from all over the world who sell winter vacations to clients," LTVA Vice President of Tourism Development Tony Lyle told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Mountain Travel Symposium is hosted by a different resort town each year.

To host the event, LTVA successfully placed a bid with a destination marketing organization in 2015. LTVA then partnered with Heavenly, Harrah's, and Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel to provide the conference center, mountain activities, and

accommodations for attendees. LTVA's goal was to unite the worldwide ski industry and grow the local economy by bringing new businesses and clients to the South Shore.

"We are a tourist destination and LTVA is bringing the mountain business here," Lyle said. "We did a lot of outreach and this event is good for everybody, from banquet servers to hotel owners."



Travel conference attendees are treated to skiing and dining at Heavenly. Photo/Terra Breeden

Additionally, LTVA is focused on producing more business on the South Shore by inspiring ski clubs and councils who attend the symposium to plan their annual winter vacations at the ski resorts and hotels in this area. Many of the clients who came to the event were impressed by the transformation of the area since the Great Recession, especially in areas like the Heavenly Village.

"A lot of people have been blown away by the village, the mountain, and the beauty of the lake," Lyle said. "These people had preconceived notions from 10-15 years ago, but there is new business being booked already during this conference."

At the weeklong Mountain Travel Symposium, a wide range of networking opportunities, activities, and business presentations were offered each day. Attendees learned how to grow their companies with social media marketing tactics and vacation home rental schemes during the popular breakout sessions on Wednesday and Thursday. And over the weekend, attendees met with other like-minded professionals to discuss business strategies and network in speed-dating-style, one-on-one meetings and group assemblies.

"This is a great place to meet with current clients and develop new relationships because the sharing of information and networking is critically important. Everybody is an expert here when it comes to the ski and snowboard industry. It is a great venue and event," Janet Janssen, director of property management at Travel Guard International in Stevens Point, Wis., told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Janssen, who has been attending the Mountain Travel Symposium for eight years, said that the symposium has been growing in popularity with more international companies joining this conference than in earlier years. Attendees wore name tags emblazoned with their home countries and hailed from places such as Spain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Belgium.

"The international companies bring a new perspective. Their mountains and customers are different from the U.S.," Janssen said. "Everyone gains a better insight on how to run their business. They learn about marketing and gain more knowledge about the industry as a whole."

Although most of the conference days were spent within the

confines of Harrah's, this rowdy bunch of professional outdoor enthusiasts were more likely to form meaningful business relationships in skis and snow boots than they were in suits and heels. Heavenly was awash in ski-industry professionals conducting impromptu meetings on the chairlifts before hitting the slopes with their newfound business partners.

Skiing conditions were warm and sunny during the event and Heavenly was relatively quiet; winding down during the last couple weeks of operation. The Mountain Travel Symposium guests virtually had the mountain to themselves. Multiple languages and accents could be heard as symposium attendees skied together in small groups and explored the mountain.

"This place is magical. I can't believe how great the spring skiing is," Herman Buchan, symposium attendee and manager of Hotel Castor, a luxury resort in Champoluc, Italy, said.

Next year, the Mountain Travel Symposium is scheduled in Whistler, British Columbia. The event returns to the Lake Tahoe area in 2020 and will be at Squaw Valley.