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A bright spot: Visitors' spending up at Reno, Tahoe



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RENO, Nev. — Visitor volume in Nevada remained flat in 2013 but tourists spent more while they were here, an encouraging trend for 2014, tourism officials say.

In Washoe County, the news was even better. Visitor numbers in the first nine months were up about 2 percent to nearly 4 million visitors who were willing to shell out more for the experience, says Chris Baum, president and CEO, the Reno-Sparks Convention & Visitors Authority.

“The average hotel room rate is up almost \$10 after being flat for almost five years. We made \$27 million more in rooms’ revenue by charging more and getting it,” says Baum. “That’s on the upward trend and it’s great to see.”

Most of the RSCVA’s big events will be back in 2014, although notably Safari Club International moved to the Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas after outgrowing Reno, says Baum. A similar event held by a different hunting organization for 2014 may be announced soon, he says.

The United State Bowling Congress is returning with both its Open Championships, which brought in 78,750 visitors and \$150 million this year, and its Women’s Championships, which drew 37,000 visitors.

“That’s 100,000 room nights in the first quarter and gets the year off to a great start,” says Baum.

One of northern Nevada's new events is coming to Smith Creek Playa near Austin in July. The North American Landsailing Association will host its Landsailing World Championship there, with about 180 racers from 15 different countries participating. (The event was held in southern Nevada in 1990 and 2002.)

"I know we are involved with the 150-year celebration in Nevada and have become a signature event," says Dennis Bassano, president of the landsailing association, referring to the state's sesquicentennial next year. "We are putting much more into promotion of this event than any in the past."

Elko's National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is celebrating its 30th anniversary and organizers expect attendance to be up at the early winter event, especially after a social media campaign designed to reach out to younger attendees, says Don Newman, executive director of the Elko Convention & Visitors Authority.

"All our events look to be strong," says Newman.

That includes the Elko Mining Expo in June, which has a waiting list for exhibitors, says Newman, despite a downturn in the industry.

Changes in the mining business has freed up hotel rooms, which were being consumed for new workers when housing development lagged behind the industry during its heyday. Still, at least one new hotel is on the drawing board, from Gold Dust West, and new retail is moving in all the time, including national chains such as Petco pet supply store, says Newman.

South Lake Tahoe-Stateline is expecting new development there, too, to draw visitors.

Heavenly Mountain Resort is completing the second phase of its Adventure Peak area with rope courses and zip lines, turning the ski resort into a summer destination for the first time. Two hotels — The Landing Resort & Spa and Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel — were recently renovated and have reopened. The Round Hill Pines beach and marina in Zephyr Cove signed a 30-year lease with a new concessionaire who will refurbish the area, including the historic rental cabins at the site.

And the long-lingering South Lake Tahoe project once called The Chateau and better known as the gaping hole in the ground just a few feet from Stateline is going to open with retail and restaurants in the summer. Eventually, the project is expected to house a nightclub and at least 15,000 square feet of meeting space.

"Hopefully, another developer will develop hotel there," says Carol Chaplin, executive director at the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

Meanwhile, the Nevada Commission on Tourism, which this year launched a rebranding campaign focusing on outdoor recreation, is targeting travelers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Mexico, the United Kingdom and South Korea.

"That's our big priority for 2014, attracting visitors from international markets," says Claudia Vecchio, director, Nevada Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs.

