

Los Angeles Times

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From the Los Angeles Times

UTAH

Utah: A chill in Park City

The Utah town aims to ride out the faltering economy and a threatened boycott. Meanwhile, resorts are offering amazing deals, even during the Sundance Film Festival.

By Jay Jones
Reporting from Park City, Utah
December 30, 2008

Peter Curtis says he's planning to keep the thermostat in his home at 68 this winter. Last year, he had it set at 73, but that was before the economy tanked. And even though the president of the Park City Mountain Resort acknowledges he can certainly afford the higher utility bill that comes with a warmer setting, he's being fiscally conservative.

Like most Americans, he's waiting for the other shoe -- or, in his case, the other ski boot -- to drop. And he's concerned about how far that boot will fall.

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Newpark Resort & Hotel, 1476 Newpark Blvd., Park City; (877) 649-3600, www.newparkresort.com. Resort anchors a new complex that includes shops, restaurants and an eight-screen movie theater. Doubles from \$129.

Park City Mountain Resort, 1320 Lowell Ave., Park City; (800) 331-3178, www.pcmr.com. One of the top family resorts in the West offers a vast selection of mountainside lodging. From about \$88 a night.

TO LEARN MORE

Park City Chamber of Commerce Convention and Visitors Bureau is a great place to begin planning a winter holiday; (800) 453-1360, www.parkcityinfo.com.

Bookings at the plethora of hotels in and around Park City -- one of the sites of the 2002 Winter Olympics -- are down 15% to 25% this winter, according to the local visitors bureau. And, Curtis says, the average stay at his resort, compared with last year, has fallen to 4.3 days from 5.6.

"They'll ski," he says, "but they're going to find ways to save money." That, he adds, will likely include spending less in restaurants, bars and gift shops.

There are other concerns hovering over Park City as well. The Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has come under fire for funneling millions of dollars from its members into the Yes on 8 campaign, a California proposition that banned gay marriage.

Some gays and lesbians have called for a boycott of Utah, specifically the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, which is to begin Jan. 15. But some observers around town say the threats haven't coalesced into anything significant.

"It's a whisper campaign, if anything," Curtis says.

Craig McCarthy, communications manager for the Park City Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau, notes: "The noise from the economy is really overshadowing everything else."

Bill Malone, its executive director, says: "Measuring the impact of a Proposition 8 boycott is impossible. The big story is the economy."

Park City is "probably one of the most gay-friendly cities in the state of Utah," Malone says, pointing to the community's diversity and welcoming atmosphere, so much so that -- according to Curtis, the ski resort president -- the community's known as "Sin City" in other parts of Utah.

"We're definitely aware of the emotion around the [Prop. 8] issue," says Jill Miller, managing director of the film fest's sponsor, the Sundance Institute, in Park City. She notes that advance ticket sales are actually up, compared with last year.

"Sundance has always been a place that fosters dialogue about the issues of our time," she says. "So it would be unfortunate if people were to boycott the festival, because that's exactly where these kinds of discussions that need to happen do happen."

The chamber's Malone says Park City will be bustling as usual during the film festival. It's all those other days between now and the arrival of spring that has him, and seemingly everyone else, wondering what to expect.

"This is uncharted territory," Malone says.

Meanwhile, consumers will discover opportunities to save some big bucks this winter.

The Newpark Resort, the community's newest upscale hotel, is offering unchanging, flat room rates through the end of March. That includes holiday weekends and the film festival.

"It's counterintuitive to economics," general manager Chris Eggleton acknowledges, but he says it's "one way we can tackle the economy."

Standard rooms at Newpark are being offered for \$129 a night. An 800-square-foot, one-bedroom suite -- which includes a hot tub and a full kitchen -- is priced at \$169. During the film festival, Eggleton says such a room often fetches \$700 or more.

Other hotels are offering a free night with the purchase of a certain number of nights. But the deal at the Silver King may be particularly attractive to skiers. The resort is offering a free pair of Rossignol skis, poles and bindings -- valued at \$799 -- with a seven-night stay.

Curtis says he and others are watching and waiting to see how much post-holiday business they get. They consider this period the true measure of the town's economic health. Curtis expects to make adjustments to prices based on what actually happens, not on the fear factor.

"It's really easy to overreact to something we've never experienced," he says.

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