Heavenly almost lives up to its name

By Kathryn Reed

Friendly – that is the word to sum up Heavenly Mountain Resort.

This hasn't always been the case for this Lake Tahoe resort that straddles California and Nevada. Less flattering words were often associated with the resort in the past and still linger with those who don't call this their home mountain.



Done with their work, reindeer take to the slopes at Heavenly on Christmas Day. Photo/Kathryn Reed

As an extremely infrequent skier at the South Shore resort, I was told by season passholders this friendliness wasn't just Christmas cheer being dispersed – it's the norm.

When Vail Resorts bought Heavenly in March 2002, one goal was to work on guest services. From the lifties to the food service workers to security to people dealing with less than patient media – everyone was great on Christmas Day.

Skiing Christmas Day is a present unto itself – usually it's less crowded. For two locals who got there at 8:30am, they had the mountain to themselves.

Cathy Donovan of Los Gatos was with her three sons – ages 24, 22 and 14 – taking in some runs.

"No one believes in Santa. Christmas is one of the less crowded days of this week," Donovan, a 1977 South Tahoe High grad, said of why she was on the slopes.

The Zarenba family has skied at Killington and Mammoth, with this being their first trip to Tahoe. Living outside of London means they don't have the luxury of driving up to Tahoe every weekend.

Dad Stefan, 7-year-old Jay and 15-year-old Chelsea all said Heavenly was better than the other U.S. resorts they've been to.

"There is more night life, shops, skiing – the whole town is better," Stefan Zarenba said.

He also commented on the friendliness of the resort and how it's better organized than other places he's been to.

Being Jewish meant Beth Gelles didn't have to worry about what her family thought of skiing on Christmas Day – just another day on the calendar for them.

"With the economy, we didn't take a big trip this year," said Gelles, who lives in San Mateo. Deer Valley is usually where she and her husband and their children, ages 10, 8 and 4, like to ski.

Christmas was their third day of being on the slopes at Heavenly â€“ and the least crowded.

"The views are exceptional," Gelles said.

Heavenly has the best views of Lake Tahoe. Homewood, on the West Shore, makes you feel like you're descending into the icy water, but Heavenly has more expansive views than any Tahoe resort.

The calm water on this blue bird day was almost inviting – well, maybe to be on the paddle-wheelers that plied the waters in the distance.

It was a bit disconcerting, though, to read the resort's website about what's open – "We couldn't ask for any more this Christmas than being 100% open" – and finding this to not be the case. The same posting was up hours after the resort was closed for the day.

The six of us were about to go down Canyon. Nope. Closed. Snowmaking in progress. Yes, the website says as much, but after reading the home page about 100 percent being open, why would one venture deeper into the site?

A bit more snowmaking (or Mother Nature) could be used on some of the trails. And the resort could improve marking the rocks and other obstacles.

Don't even get me started on the $10 bland veggie burrito at East Peak Lodge, the $9 beer or small hot cocoa for more than $3. If the resort could spread the expertise in hospitality to quality of food and fair pricing, it would make for a more positive skiing experience.

Amanda Olson in the California Bar gets the employee of the day award for her exceptional service and friendliness. Maybe it has something to do with her hometown being Paradise.

One touch that was new since I was last at Heavenly is pulling down the security bar on the Canyon chair and finding a map of the resort. That sure beats taking off gloves and fiddling with a paper map, especially had it been snowing.

But when you have three women skiing together, it did seem a bit sexist for the advertisement for private lessons to say something like start the day as Bob, Bill and Walter and finish it as Hans, Franz and Werner. Why not start the day as Kae, Sue and Brenda and finish it as Hannah, Lindsey and Picabo?

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