

Tourism study: South Shore excels at outdoor recreation, lacks quality dining experiences

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Travelers are looking for a deeper connection to their destination than just a Kodak moment. It's as if they want a relationship with the locale and not just a fling.

Being able to deliver what are in many ways intangibles is going to set the South Shore apart from other areas, according to a marketing expert.

In a yearlong survey of visitors (July 2015-July 2016) people were asked a variety of questions to gauge what brought them here, the experience they had, and the money they spent. Other pertinent information was gathered into a Visitor Profile Study by SMG Consulting of South Lake Tahoe for Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

Carl Ribaud, principal of the marketing firm, on Nov. 10 highlighted some of the results for the LTVA board.

"I've been looking at different destinations to see the role that local culture plays. I asked a set of questions to find out what people thought they really wanted to get out of a place," Ribaud said.

The tangibles of Lake Tahoe included: recreation, gaming, natural environment, music and food. The subtler attributes people sought were: a friendly and welcoming community, a place where they were comfortable to be themselves and do what they liked, and being in a vibrant, energetic and interesting

area.

According to the survey, 86 percent said the area “has a feel I like.”

However, only 65 percent said the area provided a unique experience. Still, 84 percent found the recreation experience they wanted.



A growing number of people are coming to Tahoe to participate in sports that don't cost money. Photo/LTN file

The area that needs most improvement is dining. This also generated the most discussion at Thursday's meeting.

“We are focused on low-cost offering. We are not very risky in what we offer,” LTVA Executive Director Carol Chaplin said. “We are meat and potato places.”

Ribaudo noted that food more now than ever is a contributing factor in where people travel, and it's not just foodies making this a priority. People are increasing the amount of money they allocate to dining when they travel.

“As a whole we are not seen as having what other destinations have in food and dining,” Ribaudó said.

Survey responses included:

- Has the restaurant choices I like – 37 percent
- Has quality restaurants – 37 percent.

What survey takers praised the South Shore for the most (95 percent) was the scenic beauty.

The survey revealed that 19 percent of the visitors are staying in a vacation rental. It used to be closer to 5 percent.

“My assessment is that the hotel-motel experience has fundamentally not changed on the South Shore. These numbers are only going to go up unless we change the housing stock,” Ribaudó said. “We aren’t giving them much choice with the existing lodging structure. It’s 1950’s stock.”

The last time SMG did a study like this for the South Shore tourism bureau was six years ago. The market has changed. Millennials are traveling, household income of travelers has increased, vacation home rentals are surging, and more people are spending time on free recreation like hiking, biking and kayaking.

“We are really becoming a much broader recreation area than we had been in the past,” Ribaudó said. While people are still coming to the ski resorts and renting boats in the summer, other sports are growing in popularity.

This shows that building biking-hiking trail networks – and promoting them – is paying off with getting people here for those endeavors.