

2009 may be 'best summer ever'

WHISTLER BLACKCOMB ON RECORD PACE AND BUSINESS UP FOR OTHERS, TOO

by **Claire Piech**

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Tourists are flocking to Whistler this summer, and Whistler Blackcomb's senior vice president of operations said business for his company may even be record breaking.

Both the Whistler Mountain Bike Park and the new Peak 2 Peak Gondola were humming with visitors in July said Doug Forseth, and Whistler Blackcomb is already exceeding its summer budget plans despite the world's rickety economic situation.

"Right now it looks to be a record pace," Forseth said Wednesday morning.

"We are doing surveys every week, and about 60 per cent of our visitors indicate the Peak 2 Peak is why they are going. That is definitely driving a lot of traffic, and as it goes right now, we are also on track to hit an all-time high in the bike park."

Forseth said last week's fires impacted business for three days, but Whistler Blackcomb was still ahead of budget for the week.

"Considering all the issues we are having, the market is very resilient," he said. "People really enjoy getting up the mountain."

Whistler Blackcomb's positive summer is reflected throughout the rest of the resort municipality. While many companies in Whistler are not necessarily reporting record-breaking summers, most say business has generally been up.

Lynn Gervais, spokesperson for the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, said for this past weekend alone the hotel sold out on both Saturday and Sunday.

"Saturday through Monday, we had 1,942 rooms booked," said Gervais. "I don't have any details from last year, because that was the year of the rock slide, but for 2007, we had 1,979 rooms booked."

A lot of bookings are last minute and weather dependent. In the month of July, the Fairmont picked up about 4,000 last minute bookings, said Gervais. And looking forward, August is also positive, with every Saturday already booked out.

"We are definitely ahead of forecast," said Gervais. "I think everyone was a little cautious going into summer because Whistler is known as a ski destination, so we already have a lot of work to do for summer. I think the Fairmont, as well as other people in the community, were really aggressive with the promotions we did."

Inside the family-run Ingrid's Village

Café restaurant, among the bustle of lunchtime, owner Nancy Macconnachie said that while last Sunday may have been a bit busier than usual, overall her café has seen a strong stream of business.

"Summer has been up for us," said Macconnachie. "I think it is the nice weather."

"The fire hasn't made it any different. I think it helps that we have a nice shady deck. If Whistler is having a bad summer, we don't do so well because people want to get some heat, but because it has been so hot, people want to be in the shade."

As July draws to a close and businesses prepare for August, Tourism Whistler is also tweaking their summer forecast to reflect the high number of visitors.

Spokesperson Louise Walker said Tourism Whistler originally forecasted hotel bookings for the summer, from May to October, to be down five per cent compared to 2008. Now, the organization is predicting only a two or three per cent decrease.

While Tourism Whistler is still counting the final hotel booking numbers for July, Walker said bookings in June were up 4 per cent compared to last year, and as of this week, bookings for August are also up 4 per cent.

The mountain bike festival Kokane Crankworx, taking place Aug. 8 to 16, is a large draw for visitors, said Walker. Hotel bookings for the festival, to date, are on par with the equivalent week last year, and many tourists this year are booking last minute.

"There has been a trend of later or last minute bookings, which of course doesn't show up in the pace of advance bookings," said Walker.

Macconnachie said Ingrid's is also expecting a busy August, since the Crankworx festival tends to be her café's busiest time of the year.

"We are gearing up for it," she said. "That traditionally is our busiest time. It is busier than the World Ski and Snowboard Festival."

Last summer was the third busiest summer in Whistler's history. The busiest summer ever for the resort municipality was 2007.

Walker warned, however, that while Tourism Whistler's summer forecast has improved, it is important to remember that Whistler is still in a very competitively priced market.

Great deals and world-class facilities, combined with warm weather, make an attractive package, she said. ■