

Coronavirus challenges central Oregon tourism

Bend tourism businesses pivoting to locals

By SUZANNE ROIG
Bend Bulletin

BEND — Cog Wild Bicycle Tours had been looking to this summer as a period of expansion for the 14-year-old business.

Then a pandemic hit and turned Lev Stryker's business model upside down.

"We went from potentially a big expansion year to just about laying everyone off," Stryker said.

Summer is a time when central Oregon shines. The Deschutes River becomes a superhighway for inner-tube floaters. A myriad of mountain biking trails echo the sound of happy bikers. And the lakes fill up with kayakers and stand-up paddleboarders.

Typically Bend's hotels and vacation rentals hover around 80% to 90% occupancy and are booked months in advance. Restaurants and shops teem with visitors and residents.

But not this summer. Even if Gov. Kate Brown allows nonessential travel, hospitality businesses worry that no one will want to travel until a vaccine is developed.

Visit Bend, a marketing nonprofit for Bend, has a plan: Tap into local residents who may have never have taken a mountain bike ride, never gone into some of central Oregon's lava tubes, or never experienced a guided midnight hike on Mount Bachelor. The program is being called Never Have I Ever.

"I hope that we can share Bend's backyard," said David Nissen, Wanderlust Tours owner and founder. "Whether you've lived here one or 30 years, and you haven't gone underground or paddled a lake in a kayak, I hope that it's attractive to locals.

"Similarly, I hope Deschutes County residents go out to dinner and experience our backyard."

On Wednesday the city of Bend extended its emergency order that discourages travel to the community through the second phase of reopening, which could be after June 5. The order discourages vacation travel outside Bend and discourages hotel stays.

The effects from COVID-19 stay-at-home orders could be felt for years to come. Visit Bend predicts it could take three years to return to pre-COVID-19 times for Bend.

"On one side you have pent up demand for travel, which should benefit a destination like Bend," said Todd Montgomery, Oregon State University-Cascades executive in residence who runs the hospitality management degree program. "But on the other side, based on the current unemployment rate, the average consumer will have less discretionary income to travel.

"Then, of course, we don't know how the virus will react as we try to open back up. Although the future is unclear, the next three to four weeks should provide a glimpse into our pre-vaccine future."

In 2018, the most current year data are available, there were 4.5 million visitors to central Oregon. Tourism generated \$1.28 billion in economic impact in central Oregon, according to data provided by the Central Oregon Visitors Association.

Going forward, based upon industry projections, the hospitality business forecasts a 30% decrease in revenue over the next coming months, said Kevney Dugan, Visit Bend CEO. If the number of positive COVID-19



Ryan Brennecke/Bend Bulletin

Cooper Day jumps over a rock formation while warming up before taking part in a mountain bike skills session through Cog Wild on Wednesday.

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cases remain low and area hospitals are not inundated with patients sick from COVID-19, the governor will move to Phase 2 of her reopening plan, which lifts the travel restrictions.

"I don't have any indicators that (Never Have I Ever program) will work as we are in uncharted waters along with everyone else," Dugan said. "I think there is merit in Visit Bend trying to encourage the local population to get out and explore their community, a step further while we wait for the ability to get the tourism industry back up and running in a more traditional sense."

The tourism industry generates transient room tax for the city and the county. In March, with just half the month in lockdown, collections were down 53.4% for the county and nearly 60% for the city of Bend, compared to the same period in 2019, Dugan said. Bend collected \$304,000 in room tax in March.

Central Oregon Visitors Association and Visit Bend are not promoting travel until the ban is lifted by the governor, said Julia Theissen, Central Oregon Visitors Association CEO.

"I anticipate Central Oregon will be well-suited to welcome travelers when the time is right," Theissen said. "Visitors will be seek-

ing nature, family vacations and wide-open spaces to recreate."

Like Stryker, Nissen is having trouble finding his footing amid the pandemic. Respecting Brown's mandates to avoid unnecessary travel during this first phase of reopening after more than six weeks of strict business closures, Nissen wants to be sensitive and safe.

"To be sure, we all realize that things are not normal," Nissen said. "Visit Bend is being a strong partner and trying to be sen-

sitive to our community as well."

Data show that the tourism industry revenue will be down as much as 86% for April to a 35% decrease seven months from now.

In normal circumstances, Diana Spring, owner of A Stone's Throw Bungalow Vacation Rentals, would be booked solid between Memorial Day and Labor Day. With the travel ban still in place, Spring has switched from the short-term to the long-term rental business.

"It was a fast and hard pivot to monthly, for sure," said Spring, who manages 20 rentals in Bend. "We're dealing with this day by day, case by case."

The last thing she wants is for more people to get sick should businesses open up too quickly.

"We're looking to the governor to provide safe guidance to reopening," Spring said. "If that means we wait longer, that's fine. We'll hope for business and a new normal."

The Astorian wants to hear from you, Students



The Astorian is partnering with the Astoria Public Library to publish weekly audio stories of how residents in Clatsop County are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Share your story with us. Here's how:

1. Call 503-325-5590
2. Tell us your first and last name, age, area of residence, profession and the best way to reach you
3. Then tell us your story in 1-2 minutes on the recording

Your story will be included in a weekly audio digest published on The Astorian's website. The Astoria library will preserve the audio file in a local history archive accessible to library users.

We want to hear from students. Elementary, middle school, high school, home school and college students--what do you have to say about the end of the school year under COVID-19 restrictions?

The Astorian and Astoria Library may follow up with some voicemails for news stories and extended interviews.

the Astorian

Questions? E-mail Jonathan Williams at jwilliams@dailystorian.com

Nude no more?

Dear Annie: I have been married to my wonderful wife for 25 years. When we were dating, all my friends were jealous because she was so movie-star beautiful. What they didn't know was how incredible her figure was. We didn't go swimming much, and she always dressed conservatively. I kidded her that I was the only one that knew what a grand figure she had. We had been married for a couple of years when a friend of hers told her about a nude beach not far away in Miami. To my surprise, she wanted to go, and she loved it, especially the attention she received. She had been so shy and conservative in her dressing that I don't think she realized just how attractive she was in all ways.

That was about 25 years ago. Soon after the nude beach, we moved to a home with a pool and she insisted we surround the pool with a six-foot fence. She stayed nude at our pool regardless of who visited except if it were our parents or if anyone brought their children. Then this carried over to indoors. She just stopped wearing clothes unless she was going out. Our social friends sort of got used to it, as did the mailman, FedEx guy and even our favorite pizza delivery folks. She would just throw open the front door and welcome them.

Never have I thought she has been unfaithful; she just enjoys the freedom of nudity. We went to a few nudist clubs around Florida before we started having our children.

Annie, she is now in her mid-40s and while I still think she is lovely, and I love her more than ever, her figure has not aged well. She hasn't changed her lifestyle much (she dresses when our kids have friends over), and I want to suggest that not everyone enjoys seeing her naked at her age. I just don't have the nerve to tell her. Any sugges-

tions? — *Seen It All*

Dear Seen It All: Your wife was never doing this for anyone's enjoyment but her own. And if you didn't take issue with the nudity when she was 20, then I think it's shallow of you to take issue with it now. Still, I think your wife needs to be more conscientious and careful. Answering the door in the buff could constitute indecent exposure; at the very least, it could make someone uncomfortable, violating their boundaries. Encourage her instead to get back into visiting nudist clubs and retreats, where she can be with consenting adults who share the same interest.

Dear Annie: Recently, you printed a letter that suggested people start "Round Robin" letter-writing circles while we're all cooped up at home. I agree that letter writing can be a wonderful hobby. When my wife was in fifth grade, the class did a "pen pal" program where everybody wrote a letter to a person in a foreign country. She and her pen pal in Australia wrote back and forth, with each letter taking about a month to arrive, for the whole year. After that, my wife would send a Christmas card and a birthday card every year to her former pen pal. Sometimes they would share life updates.

Three years ago, we planned a trip to Australia and she told her pen pal about it.

She said to come visit them. We stayed with them for a week, including a trip to the Outback. Then we took a train to Melbourne, where her daughter lived and stayed with them for several days. Then we went back to Sydney and flew home — one of our best vacations ever! — *Phil*

Dear Phil: What an amazing thing. Strangers really are just friends waiting to happen.

DEAR ANNIE



ANNIE LANE
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