

BREAKFAST SERIES | REPORT

Idaho Tourism

BY SHARON FISHER

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After a year where for some of us our big travel was going from the living room to the kitchen, it's looking like 2021 — thanks to the coronavirus vaccine — is shaping up to be a bang-up year for Idaho tourism.

Already, flights, hotels, Airbnbs and campsites are getting booked up all over the state. And have you tried to rent a car lately?

We drew our panelists from every corner of Idaho to talk about how this will be the year we all, hopefully, will get out of town.

Excerpts from the transcript:

Westergard: Echo, it sounds like tourism is really important for your area. You saw it significantly be affected this past year, so maybe you want to speak a little bit more about how your residents feel about your tourism season.

Echo Marshall: Opinions definitely vary within the Fort Hall community on tourism. There's those who understand the importance of our business generating revenues to support our tribe, and in many aspects they're very supportive. However, there are those who are very hesitant as well about opening back up fully in relation to COVID just because, like many communities, we've experienced several deaths within our community that are COVID-related. So there's still many fears about opening back up fully and people coming in from out of state, not knowing if they've been vaccinated or where they're coming from.

And then there's the cultural sensitivity topics within our tribe as well, as far as promoting our culture in a respectful way and out of respect for our tribal elders and those cultural and religious beliefs. And then there's also the areas within our reservation that aren't open to the public. So there's trespassing issues, there's a lot of land rights issues. So as many people are coming in from out of state and just exploring around throughout the region, we have to make sure that we are communicating to our out-of-state visitors and out-of-reservation-boundary visitors, as far as what areas are accessible to non-tribal members. So signage is important, our local authorities being properly staffed, Fish and Game, who regulate those areas that are not open to outside visitors. So there's a lot of different factors that come into play when we're talking about tourism and what's appropriate and allowed within our tribe.

Westergard: Chip, what does this year's tourism season look like for you?

Chip Schwarze: In many ways, it's very similar to last year. I have a son who works at one of the resorts up in Island Park. They were booked solid this last weekend, booked throughout this week. We're seeing the closer you are to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, the busier. In years past, we would keep some of those folks in town. I think there's still a little bit of the the COVID fear out there. You know, when you stay in a hotel with 200 rooms, it's more likely you're going to run into somebody who has it than when you stay in a cabin surrounded by five acres of woods. So our Airbnbs are running strong right now, as are the small resorts. And with the weather we received, the campgrounds are filling up just as much.

So I think initially, the early part of this summer, we're going to see a repeat of last summer. We are starting to see some tour

buses coming through, nothing like the numbers we do in years past. But we are starting to see some tour groups get together and come out, but mostly we are seeing regional tourism from the Western states. Last summer, we were really busy with California escapees because most of the last summer, everything in California was shut down. They had nothing to do, so they would come here. We're still seeing a lot of repeat customers last year and we just started off the year, but people who came up here last year fell in love with the area. They're indicating that they're going to come back this year, so we think we're going to have a good summer up here this year.

Westergard: Scott Fortner, we'd love to hear what this last year is looking like for you in terms of tourism and kind of a quick look ahead on what you think this summer is going to look like for Sun Valley.

Scott Fortner: I think we were pleasantly surprised how winter went here, given, you know, all the protocols and practices in place. Actually, the resort ended up having a banner year. And I think we weren't maybe quite as prepared as we could have been, or should have been, with the information that we had and where people would be and what their comfort levels would be in terms of getting out and traveling. The other thing that we found is, as I'm sure a lot of other communities have found, is people actually stayed a lot longer. We saw some interesting trends, where people are just staying a lot longer — extended stays as well as monthly and now seasonal stays on top of quite a few real estate transactions and new residents. We actually just did our community meeting wrap-up last week, and one of the things that we uncovered is about 1,500 new residents to the valley, which is about 7% for a valley that usually, typically sees about 1%.

Westergard: Matt, could you explain to the audience who may not have heard the term "overtourism" before what you're referring to and if you have any examples of other locations around the country that have experiences and maybe some what they've done?

Matt Borud: If you had said to me, a year or two ago, that I was experiencing overtourism, I wouldn't necessarily believe that. I maybe would have said Stanley, a few times throughout the year. You know, maybe an Island Park, Victor, Driggs at certain times of the year. I'm not sure if I can give a succinct definition of what overtourism looks like, but it is that the theory or the experience of so many people descending on a destination that they actually begin to change the destination in a negative way. Maybe there are negative environmental impacts. I saw some photos this weekend of Zion and Arches National Park in Utah, and some of these hiking trails at the trailhead, it was a three-hour wait to get on to just a simple national park trail. That's where you're kind of talking about just the volume and the crush of people coming in that it overwhelms infrastructure. It creates a negative environmental impact.

I think we did see some of that last year, where you just had so many people fleeing urban areas, looking for something to do, wanting to get outside. We saw just a mas-

The Breakfast Series Panel



Borud

Matt Borud, marketing and innovation administrator, Idaho Commerce

Borud's role focuses on unifying the department's communication, marketing, and innovation initiatives through programs like the Idaho Global Entrepreneurial Mission (IGEM) grant program, Idaho Tourism and Idaho Commerce's marketing program. Before joining Idaho Commerce, he worked for the Boise-based software company, BaliHoo, where he focused on business development and customer success. He has a B.A. from the University of Oregon.

Scott Fortner, executive director, Visit Sun Valley

Fortner has more than 25 years of experience in the mountain resort and tourism industry. Before moving to Idaho, he was marketing director for the Breckenridge Tourism Office. Fortner previously worked for the Durango, Loveland and Copper Mountain ski areas in Colorado, as well as F2 Inc. in Frisco, Colorado, a sales and marketing consulting firm for the real estate and resort industry. In addition, he has won several awards, including the Colorado Governor's Outstanding Tourism Marketing Award, Creative Media Award Performance Media & Marketing and MARCOM Awards Gold.



Fortner

Echo Marshall, executive marketing director, Shoshone-Bannock Casino Hotel

With over twenty years of dedicated service to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes Gaming and Hospitality Operation, Marshall is responsible for generating revenue through the marketing of the entire organization, using market research, marketing communications, advertising and public relations. Strategic marketing initiatives for the Shoshone-Bannock Casino Hotel include increasing the visibility of Casino and Hotel brand, VIP Player Development, the property's Loyalty Initiative, Players Club and the internal and external communication efforts. She obtained her Bachelor of Business Administration in marketing and management from Idaho State University. She has served as president and board member of the Greater Blackfoot Chamber of Commerce, board member for the Pocatello/Chubbuck Chamber of Commerce, as well as a Leadership Pocatello graduate and class facilitator. She also served on Southeast Idaho's High Country Travel Council.



Marshall

Chip Schwarze, CEO, Greater Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce and Snake River Territory Convention and Visitors Bureau

Schwarze has been the CEO for the Greater Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce and the Idaho Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau since March 2017. He has a background in the administration of large volunteer organizations, fundraising, business to business sales, sales management, finance and entrepreneurship. He most recently worked as a district director for the Boy Scouts of America in Olympia, Washington, where he was the lead administrator for three districts covering southwestern Washington. He also has ties to the Idaho Falls area, as he previously worked as a financial advisor and sales manager in Idaho Falls for several years. He is a graduate of Brigham Young University-Idaho.



Schwarze

Moderator: Carrie Westergard, executive director of the Boise Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB)



Westergard

Westergard has held her current position for over six years. She is responsible for overseeing, planning and directing the operations and programming for the Boise CVB, whose mission is to enhance Boise's economy through the marketing, promotion and selling of the city and region as a site for conventions, corporate meetings, trade shows, leisure travel, cultural, sports and special events. The Boise CVB has drawn larger conventions and more sporting events than ever in the city's history. Her 25-year tenure in the travel industry includes stints with resorts, property management, public transportation and visitors bureaus.

sive uptick in vacation rentals. And then people hitting grocery stores and rural communities because of just this massive influx of visitation that it creates a real negative experience, certainly for those local residents. You've got a role to play as a traveler and a visitor. We want you to be a member of our community during your visit, but here's what that means and here's the impact that your visit, positively and

negatively, can have on our destination. So it does bring up some really interesting ideas from a marketing and communication perspective, but I think we saw a little bit of that last year, and you know, again as we know, it has been discovered, for the last several years. But what is it going to look like in a post-COVID world down the road is still the question we're trying to figure out.

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BREAKFAST SERIES | COMMENTARY



Idaho's convention business recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic

By Carrie Westergard

Yes, we are coming back. Idaho and the Boise metro area have already seen the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. As we readjust to today's version of near-normal, I'm delighted to report that visitors are ready to gather and travel once again. We also have you to thank for maintaining some visitation with staycations over this past year. This year would not have turned out the same without your support of the hospitality industry. Here in Boise and the nearby surroundings, we're celebrating, not fretting, about the future. We're welcoming visitors back to our area, and encouraging them to consider bringing more meetings, conventions and events to our area.

But all this excitement wasn't without challenges. The climb back to the kind of visitation and meeting activity that we enjoyed pre-pandemic times isn't easy, but we're getting there. Make no mistake, Idaho is well-positioned to greet visitors who are itching to get out to where life is a little more relaxed, and where there is room to breathe.

As Idaho returns to the nation's mind as a place to visit and get away from the bigger cities, I thought it worth sharing some of the things we've learned, and how we intend to re-emerge as a popular smaller city that visitors enjoy.

Already we've had some good indicators of progress. Recently, the Western States Hostage Negotiators regional event reported on its website that its meeting in Boise was "a fantastic five days of in-person training in Boise."

More than 300 attendees reported a quality visit.

Now here in June, we're looking hard at sporting events coming back online, including the U.S. Youth Soccer Association Far West Regionals and the USA Pickleball Pacific Northwest Regional Championship, slated to take place from June 22nd through June 27th, a first for the Boise area. These incoming events have inspired our own local organizers to reconsider their decisions to scale back or even shut down sporting events. The Twilight Criterium and Boise Albertsons Open are planning to make a comeback, and we've all been excited to see this month's announcement of the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl returning to Boise's fields in December.

Which is precisely the point we're making to many people who live here in Idaho but who are connected to larger, national or regional business coalitions, associations or events. When these people tell me about their events in other cities getting cancelled, my response is: Send them to us. We at the Boise Convention and Visitors Bureau are good at making room.

We call this our "Bring Your Conference Home" initiative, and it is an idea that's well overdue. If you, in your day-to-day work, are aware of a meeting or get-together that is looking for a place to land, let me encourage you to speak up and represent Boise as a place to gather.

These could be a few years out and although we've

successfully hosted events that draw as many as 1,700 visitors, we do well with small groups too. The 300-600 person group is a bit of a sweet spot for Boise; we do well with events of that size range, and we're only going to get better at it.

As we go about our professional and personal lives, we are often tied to something larger, a group of people who share our type of job or who are affiliated in some other way, and who try to get together when possible. And so often, we head off to larger cities or far away places for our gatherings. To all of you, I say, don't forget your home town, and how great it could be to gather people in Boise for a change.

That's the sort of lessons we learned through this singular period in history. Over and over, we have heard stories about cities and destinations struggling to maintain their identity during this challenging period. Those who dug in and worked hard to maintain that were the successful ones. I've been admiring the many businesses in Boise that have done that very thing. It's that sort of resilience, that sort of determination, that make Boise the kind of great place to live and work. And as we did before the pandemic's arrival, I believe it's the kind of thing that makes Boise the great place for visitors as well.

— Carrie Westergard is executive director of the Boise Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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