

Weak dollar bringing foreign skiers

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From staff and wire reports

KILLINGTON — The weak American dollar is helping attract Canadians and other foreign tourists to Vermont's ski areas where they are spending more time and money than a typical domestic skier, officials said.

By far, Canadians make up the largest share of the state's international clientele, but resorts say people are coming from Europe, South America and elsewhere, officials said.

Stowe Marketing Director Mike Colbourn said the number of Canadian visitors is up 10 percent to 12 percent over last year.

Last week, the number of Canadian visitors jumped 15 percent to 20 percent compared to previous years.

Many Ontario schools take breaks during early March.

"The average stay of a domestic visit is somewhere between three and four days," Colbourn said. "Whereas, an international visitor averages between eight and 10 days. So, if you get a family from Ireland, the U.K. or South America, they're here for a week (or) a week and a half. And that just doesn't happen with domestic visitors. They're mostly here on the weekends."

Killington Resort has seen an influx of international visitors this season.

Killington spokesman Tom Horrocks said for many foreign visitors the United States is on sale right now.

Horrocks said the ski resort is seeing more foreign skiers "because their currency is valued more than ours right now." For example, he said visitors from the United Kingdom receive \$2 for every British pound.

He said Canadian visitors also enjoy a slight advantage.

"It's kind of ironic because six or seven years ago all the Americans were going to Whistler, Lake Louise, Mont Tremblant," he said. "You know all those Canadian resorts because the U.S. dollar was so strong."

Horrocks said now the tables are turned. Last week, a holiday for many Canadians, he said Killington saw a large number of skiers from Quebec and Ontario with resort lodging at near capacity.

He said the number of foreign visitors is evident by the different languages heard on the ski slopes and at the lift lines. In addition to the United Kingdom, the resort has seen a number of foreign visitors, mostly from eastern European countries of Poland, Czech Republic and Russia.

On a related subject, Killington is employing 180 international workers this season.

Horrocks said the State Department issued approval for 180 H2B visas to employ foreign workers but the resort was only able to fill 110 positions.

"What we were unable to fill with H2B visas, we were able to fill with more J1s, which is the foreign student visas, and some additional employees from the local labor market," he said.

At the season's peak, Killington employs 1,800 full-, part-time and seasonal workers.

Horrocks said H2B visas are issued based on the need of the employer when no local help is available. He said the visas are issued for a specified job such as a lift operator. Someone working under a J1 student visa can be employed at any position as needed. Depending on their school schedule in their home country, students on a J1 visa come and go during the course of the ski season.

Smuggler's Notch Marketing Director Nancy Illemann said 85 percent of last week's overnight visitors were from Canada.

And Smugglers has been pushing its family-friendly ski brand in Argentina, Colombia, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Illemann said.

The number of European and Latin American visitors at Smuggler's Notch is about 5 percent of total skiers, but Illemann said she expected that number to grow.

"What we've found is the folks from the Latin American countries have roots either in Miami or in New York. So they are familiar with traveling to the East Coast and many of them already do speak English," she said.