

# The Mountaineer

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## GHOST TOWN

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Haywood County tourism reached higher numbers during 2007 than ever before, creating a ripple effect throughout the county, particularly in Maggie Valley, that breathed new life into nearly every facet of business from retail to overnight accommodations.

While several factors deserve credit for the spike in summer tourists streaming into the area, nothing got more than Ghost Town in the Sky.

The sleeping giant of western theme amusement parks officially reawakened from a near five-year hibernation May 25, when Ghost Town re-opened its gates under new ownership, igniting a new era of family entertainment.

To date, nearly \$ 10 million has been spent on the park's reconstruction and refurbishment, Ghost Town officials said.

While park officials will not disclose an exact tally of park visitors, there's no doubt that tens of thousands of tourists visited the county last summer to catch a glimpse of the park's famous gunfighters and saloon girls.

Compared to last year's figures, the number of overnight stays have seen monthly increases of between 13 and 34 percent this season the highest increase to date- based upon occupancy tax collections. The collections are based a 3 percent tax charged by overnight accommodations throughout the county.

Hotel/motel bookings in the county were up 11 percent in June and up 7 percent for the entire fiscal year. Maggie accommodations, those closest to the park, experienced a 10 to 40 percent increase in business, compared to last year's numbers, according to representatives for the Maggie Valley Hotels and Motels Association.

Interestingly, most of the park's guests were in-state residents.

Ghost Town reported that the highest percentage of guests, 38 percent, came from other areas of North Carolina. Most out-of-state visitors traveled from the county's closest neighbors: 17 percent from South Carolina; 11 percent from Florida; 9 percent from Georgia and 9 percent from Tennessee. Guests from Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi and Kentucky made up a small percentage of park guests and 7 percent came from other states.

Other types of businesses also benefitted from the increase in traffic.

Maggie businesses reported an increase in revenues ranging from 12 to 25 percent over last year's tourist season.

Not only did the park's return spawn one of the most successful tourist seasons to date, it also put Haywood County back on the map as a family-friendly destination.

Since the park's closing in 2002, followed by the closing of Soco Gardens Zoo several years later, Maggie had little to offer young visitors, particularly during summer months.

Ghost Town's return offered young children something to do that even adults could enjoy. Business owners along Soco Road consistently reported seeing a much higher volume of families, particularly those with small children, walking the sidewalks through town, staying overnight in hotels, eating in local restaurants, playing putt putt and shopping.

In addition to the high volume of tourists being lured to the county by the sound of gunfire ringing from atop Buck Mountain, the parks re-opening put many others to work.

Ghost Town hired around 100 laborers to work during the reconstruction phase, from September 2006 to the park's May reopening. In addition, other crews were subcontracted out to complete various jobs, including roofing and electrical work.

Furthermore, hundreds of individuals were hired to begin working at Ghost Town in some capacity when the park opened late spring. In July, when visitor turnout was at its peak, about 340 were included on the park's payroll.

Also during 2007, Ghost Town brought Maggie Valley a taste of red carpet stardom that's earning the county worldwide recognition. The first ever world premiere to be hosted in Haywood County, debuting Ghost Town the Movie, was held June 2 at Eaglenest Entertainment.