

Ghost Town is back in business

Beth Fleming

Like during the “old days,” crowds lined the streets of Ghost Town in the Sky this weekend to watch the Apache Kid and his gang face off with a new Marshall. Saloon doors were left swinging while toe-tapping patrons packed into the Silver Dollar and Red Dog saloons, leaving not an empty seat in the house.

Ghost Town in the Sky got off to a slow start Friday due to minor transportation complications, but even the lack of the chairlift and many un-operable rides wasn't enough to throw a damper on the enthusiasm. Thousands of visitors showed up for the park's re-opening weekend. No one went away disappointed.

Although a final attendance tally was not available Sunday, park owners Hank Woodburn and Peter Hairston said they are very satisfied with how the weekend went, and very pleased with the turnout of visitors.

Visitors were pleased, and some were surprised, with what one woman called an “impressive” supply of merchandise available in retail shops along the western town's Main Street. Children enjoyed having their faces painted by Cherokee performers, licking ice cream cones and taking a chance at winning a stuffed animal by playing ski-ball. But the highlight of the weekend was, by far, all-star performances by Ghost Town's famed gunfighters and saloon performers, a testimony to what makes the Ghost Town experience so special and unique.

Ghost Town entertainers proved this weekend that the thrill of the park is about much more than rides.

“When we realized the rides weren't going to be ready we knew we had to put a special effort into the entertainment,” said Entertainment Manager Robert Bradley, better known to some as the park's Apache Kid. “Everyone has made a special effort to go above and beyond to make sure visitors had the best experience possible... we've not seen anyone, yet, who wasn't satisfied-in fact, everyone seems beyond satisfied.” Tickets were discounted 50 percent Friday through Sunday to make up for the lack of rides in operation. Now that the chairlift is running, tickets today will be discounted at for adults, for children.

“We said we'd open May 25 and we wanted to keep our promise,” said General Manager Bob Cordier, “but when we realized some of the rides weren't going to be open, we decided to discount tickets...we couldn't offer a full ride package so we didn't want to charge full price.”

Cordier said tickets will be discounted until “I think when we have a decent ride

package,” he said “Decent” depends on operable thrill rides. “We need our thrills,” he said. “We need our drop tower.”

Park officials expect to have Geronimo Drop in operation by next weekend.

Due to last-minute delays, park officials realized Thursday the chairlift would not be in operation.

The chairlift was not operable until Sunday due to complications with the computer system that runs it; mostly it just needed “de-bugging,” Cordier said.

Also “Thursday, park officials decided to run only a few rides during opening weekend. Four of 11 rides were in operation—three kiddies and one adult ride: the scrambler. The hold-up, Cordier explained, was a matter of safety.

“We had to decide (early on) to what extent do we want to refurbish the rides, and we decided to tear them down to nothing and build them back completely,” Cordier said. “We could have shorted some areas...we didn’t have to sandblast every piece, or drill out all the rivets or take every control box apart...but we also decided early on that if we were going to do it, we were going to do it right... that’s our reputation. We want people to leave happy.”

It appeared everyone did leave happy, While most visitors admitted the ride package will certainly add to the excitement of the park experience, no one claimed feeling deprived.

The Seigler family traveled from Jacksonville just for Ghost Town’s re-opening.

“We came for the experience,” Michelle Seigler said. “The lack of rides does not take away from the experience. It would have been a plus, but we can deal with it. The shows were the highlight today.”

Mike Seigler said he plans to bring the family back in July once everything is up and running.

In the absence of the chairlift, at least 10 vans, two tour buses and six school buses were used to shuttle guests to the top of Buck Mountain where the park is located. Sunday, park officials began transporting guests in open-sided trolley-type vehicles, in addition to the chairlift.

One family from Sarasota, Fla., who also owns a home in Maggie Valley, said they didn’t mind riding up in a van, in fact, they actually appreciated the opportunity to see the valley from a different perspective.

“We loved the bus ride up,” Pam Pilat said, speaking on behalf of her husband and two daughters who, at the time were having an old-time photo taken. “I’m glad we got to take the bus up,” she said, adding her family owns season passes and will have other opportunities to ride the chairlift.

By Saturday, nearly all the opening day kinks were ironed out, Cordier said, and things were running much more smoothly.

Cordier said he anticipates “tremendous progress” will be made this week, and “there should be a lot more open next weekend,” he said, including Heritage Town Square and several more rides.

But not the cliff hanging roller coaster, nor the incline railway. The Cliff Hanger will not be operable until the June 11 grand re-opening celebration, the incline railway will be operable a short time after that, “early summer,” said Sales and Marketing Director David King. “It’s a one-of-a-kind track and we’re waiting for parts.”

King also pointed out, the elevation of the park introduced a few unforeseen complications into transporting equipment and supplies up to the park, by way of Rich Cove Road, “the steepest state maintained road in North Carolina,” he said. “And there were other things that held up the process that were beyond our control,” he added, like having the chairlift cable, being imported from Switzerland, get held up for weeks in customs.

“We’re working hand-in-hand very closely with ride inspectors and engineers to ensure everything is 100 percent safe,” Cordier said. “Safety is our primary concern.” Nonetheless, he said, it never hurts to check the Web site, or call the park office before planning to visit the park next weekend, if visitors are banking on rides.