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- Front Page
- Development
- Politics
- Outdoors
- Books
- New West Blog
- Community Blogs
- Magazine
- New West Images
- Conferences



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- New West Bend
- Flathead Beacon
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West to World: Welcome Yen, Euro and Pound

The lame dollar is making the American West look even more enticing to foreign tourists this year. In Vail and Breckenridge, for instance, international visitors are up about 25 percent already.
By Amanda Baltazar, Guest Writer, 7-10-08

This January, room reservation numbers spiked at the Sanders Bed & Breakfast in Helena. And more recently, the family-owned business, which advertises exclusively on the Internet, has had a spate of drop-ins.

Bobbi Uecker's visitors have taught her "Thank you" in German, French and Russian and even Kurdish. That's all the foreign language she knows, and it's just enough to get along, she said.

"It's more about attitude," Uecker added. "We get by fine with sign language and smiles."

European and Asian tourists have sought the Mountain West in record numbers this year; they expect a lot, and with good reason. With the U.S. dollar trading at historic lows, there's hardly been a better time for travelers with pockets full of colorful, foreign bills.

"Well, we're half-priced," said Nancy Richardson of the Idaho Division of Tourism Development.

Already this year, some tour operators in the region have reached their annual goals, said Mathias Jung, marketing manager for Rocky Mountain International, which advertises in far-flung markets, collectively, for the tourism offices of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and South Dakota.

In Vail and Breckenridge, international visitors are up about 25 percent. More of them come from the U.K. than anywhere else, said Kristen Pettit, spokeswoman for Vail Resorts Management Co. They're coming for the late spring and summer snow, and the Wild West feeling.

In 2007, Fort Collins-based Rocky Mountains Holiday Tours had its best year ever, said owner Gary Schluter. "This year we're already up 55 percent."

Schluter points to the tremendous imbalance between other currencies and the ever-atrophying U.S. dollar. At trade shows in Europe, he has also heard potential visitors say the administration of President George W. Bush and the conservative climate in the United States has put them off for the past seven years.

"There's pent-up demand because of a perceived change in the political atmosphere," he said.

The British are the most regular vacationers in the West, followed by the Germans, then the Italians and French. Visitors from countries such as Slovenia and Luxembourg are also catching the travel bug. Many European tourists have already visited the first-tier destinations, such as New York, Florida or California, and their interest has extended to the interior West.

"People are interested in wide open spaces," Jung said. The natural beauty draws them, as do the Native American cultures, Old West history and adventure — the rafting, hiking, fishing and the allure of the region's

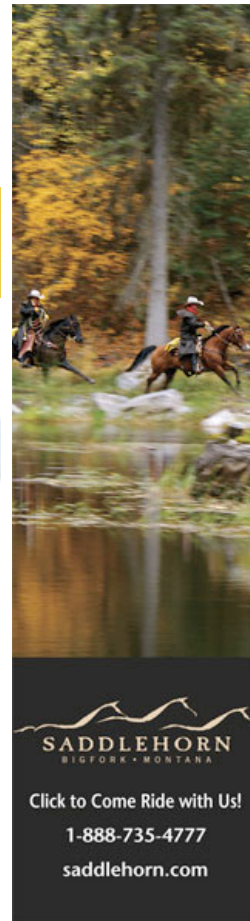


A page from the 2008 Colorado International Holiday Guide. Courtesy of the Colorado Tourism Office

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national parks.

State governments and others have been spending plenty of marketing dollars to sell the region, too, and for quite a long time. Travel Montana has been advertising the Big Sky state in Europe for about 18 years, beginning with the U.K. and Germany, but now including France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy.

All of the years of marketing have had a cumulative effect, said the state tourism department's marketing manager, Pam Gosink. "We have recognition in each of these markets."

The Internet has played an important marketing role, too, allowing small business low-cost venues for advertisement and making it easy for would-be visitors to research remote locales and to price-compare.

"Some want to see our capitol, and other people are simply visiting the West," said Uecker, who owns the Sanders guesthouse in Helena with her husband Rock Ringling.

Her guests want a warm and friendly atmosphere, she said, and someone who's willing to help.

Foreign guests aren't much different from their native brethren, Uecker explained, and while she has adjusted the breakfast menu for guests from countries like Russia and Kurdistan, who don't eat sweet foods in the mornings, it's easier than adjusting for Americans' demanding dietary quirks.

Europeans are easy guests, she added. "They're particularly relaxed because they're used to vacationing. They like to learn about an area and aren't frenetic about it, tending to allow time at each place."

--Amanda Baltazar is a Seattle-based freelance writer. She can be reached at ajbaltazar@mac.com.

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