

SOME LIKE IT HOT

By KRISTEN PRINZING

For those who love being outdoors in the cold and snow, living the good life in winter means Nordic skiing and snowshoeing in the mountains, ice skating on a frozen lake and even bicycling to work against a frigid wind. But for something

special – something sooooo Montana – there is Chico Hot Springs.

There is nothing quite like soaking in an outdoor pool of deliciously hot water straight from the bowels of the Absaroka Mountains, while steam billows gracefully above in the wintry breeze. From the pure waters, you may glimpse stars or moonlight peeking between

fast-moving clouds or watch delicate color changes at dusk or dawn. If temperatures dip low enough, you might even look through steam-frosted eyelashes.

Chico's winter-time charms have been amplified lately by the resort's diligent efforts to comprehensively incorporate sustainability into its business practices – all year 'round.

In 2007, Chico management began a 2-year sustainable business training program run by Bozeman-based Yellowstone Business Partnership. Five workshops, monthly teleconferences and peer

accountability keeps participants engaged and productive, while tracking and evaluation tools reveal progress and performance.

Hotel Manager Machele Jones has led Chico's efforts. She said they have tackled energy conservation upgrades and retrofits; incorporated high-efficiency options – like radiant heat – into new construction and renovations; revamped purchasing, reuse and recycling practices; addressed their on-site and employee transportation footprint; increased emphasis on buying local – both food and other products – and redoubled efforts to utilize existing resources (like free and plentiful hot water) to reduce energy consumption.

Employee ideas and participation underlie successes; this year a maintenance worker suggested timers on holiday lights to ensure twinkling ceases when not needed.

Major investments like new windows throughout the century-old main lodge have substantially reduced energy use, said Jones. An



entryway added to the lodge recently greatly reduced heat loss, and it is heated with hot spring water piped through the floor.

Chico is unique in many ways, not least of which is its geothermally-heated greenhouse and seasonal gardens that supply produce to its highly-regarded restaurant. "Its part of our history," said Jones, noting Chico's garden fed patrons in its earliest years. Chico's restaurant also emphasizes locally-sourced meats and other foods from area farms and ranches.

Roadblocks do occur, however. In July of 2009, their recycling program was stymied when the contract between Park County and Headwaters Recycling was not renewed. Earlier efforts to prevent waste have mitigated their current dilemma: Chico required soft drink vendors to replace plastic bottles with easier-to-recycle aluminum cans, for instance.

Chico also reduced waste and impacts by changing guest amenities. They now use products packaged in bio-plastics and low-process boxboard, and use dispensers instead of packaged items in common bathrooms. But losing recycling options is an unwelcome setback, said Jones. "It's been hard for us to go backwards, so we're working on a plan."

In these times of hyped up, sometimes overblown "green" marketing, Chico doesn't promote itself as a "Green Resort." Jones said, "I think it's because we know there's more work to be done."

Efforts are visible throughout the resort property, but many endeavors are not readily detected. Jones explained that it is "part of our guiding ethics and values." She said it's not about aiming for more guests or higher profits. "We want to be a better company, we want to be better people." **MC**

If you go:

Chico Hot Springs is 25 miles south of Livingston, MT Contact: www.chicohotsprings.com or 406-333-4933. Chico offers a gourmet restaurant, casual grille, saloon, day spa, gift shop, greenhouse, acclaimed wine cellar, convention center, horseback riding and dog sledding. Photos courtesy of Chico Hot Springs.



Kristen Prinzing, director of operations for MusEco Media and Education Project, has spent most of her professional life working to enhance public understanding of environmental sustainability, the natural world and resource conservation. Kristen writes and produces television and radio broadcast pieces on these topics regularly in our region. She is a member of the Society for Environmental Journalists and the International Society of Sustainability Professionals.



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