

A safe harbor for music and fun in the sun

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KELSEYVILLE – As 1970s and '80s hitmakers Heart perform Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" (ahhh ahhh ahhh AAHH!) onstage, a preteen boy in an oversize T-shirt and fresh-looking summer buzz cut begins swaying to the music as if in a trance.

He and the rest of the audience at Konocti Field Amphitheatre have attained a kind of rock 'n' roll bliss. It's a state achieved through a combination of open sky, gentle breezes wafting off adjacent Clear Lake, and the tuneful screams of Heart lead singer Ann Wilson, one of the few rock vocalists touring this summer – or any summer – with any right to cover Robert Plant.

The Heart show is one of more than 50 that Konocti Harbor Resort and Spa, a waterfront lodge and recreation area about 2½ hours northwest of Sacramento in Lake County, will hold this year at either its 5,000- capacity outdoor venue or 1,000-seat indoor show room.

Having entered the concert business in 1990 primarily as a classic-rock venue, Konocti has for several years attracted higher-tier acts as well, such as Tim McGraw, who plays the outdoor stage Saturday , and Kelly Clarkson, who follows the next night.

"Although we are a full-blown resort, we have become known for music," said Konocti president and general manager Greg Bennett, who runs the resort, books the music acts and manages the Lost Boys, a talented group of mop-haired teen rockers who often open for touring bands at the resort.

"And there is a method to that madness – that is a way a resort in the middle of nowhere is able to draw from all of Northern California."

Since sparsely populated Lake County accounts for only so much attendance, Konocti draws most of its audience from the North Bay, East Bay, Sacramento region and other parts of Northern California. At one point, that audience could support 80 to 100 concerts a year, Bennett said, before the economic downturn prompted a reduction in the number of shows.

Last weekend's Heart show, for its part, showed no signs of duress, economic or otherwise. The outdoor venue was at least three-quarters full, with long-hairs and potential rowdies coexisting peacefully with khaki-clad dads. If the trip to the bathroom outside the amphitheater meant a walk through the crowded designated smoking area, that's just a price one must pay for the lack of smoke in the seating area.

Mark and Diana Viale of Elk Grove, who were seated near the stage, own a vacation home on the other side of Clear Lake and occasionally attend concerts at the resort. Mark Viale, 42, used to visit the same family vacation home as a kid, and he recalls a time when the Konocti resort was "run-down and there were no concerts."

But Konocti now offers "a great place to see concerts," said Diana Viale, 38, who enjoys classic rock in open-air venues, and sometimes see shows at the Sleep Train Amphitheater in Wheatland.

Classic-rock acts like Journey and Heart can bridge the generation gap, said Michelle Apodaca, 29, of Dublin, who attended the concert with her mother, Cathy Swarm, 48.

"She played their music when I was growing up," Apodaca said of Swarm. "This is something we can do together."

For her part, Swarm said she liked "the intimacy" of the Konocti venue, where every seat is within 200 feet of the stage. And when they come to Konocti, they can stay at Swarm's father's house nearby.

The venue's out-of-the-way location prompts many concert-goers to stay in the area after the show. That can mean finding a place to stay in nearby Lakeport or at other resorts around Clear Lake, since Konocti's 260 rooms cannot accommodate the crowds who come to see its concerts.

"We are way underbuilt for concert nights, but if we built another thousand rooms, that would help us on concert nights but then we would be way, way overbuilt on other nights," Bennett said.

Started by the Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 38 out of San Francisco as a seasonal resort in 1959, Konocti has expanded considerably over the years under the guidance of Bennett, who introduced music acts, renovated rooms and converted a little-used lakeside softball field into the amphitheater. Yet the property, still owned by the union, maintains an appealingly blue-collar feel.

Running from \$129 to \$349 on concert nights, Konocti's rooms offer rustic décor complete with American Indian-inspired designs evoking the 1980s Southwestern craze. But because the rooms are so clean, the effect is less dated than transporive – returning rock fans of a certain age to a time when their thoughts ran mostly to wine coolers and to upcoming concerts by ... acts like Heart.

Offering extensive rentals of boats and other watercraft, great largemouth bass fishing and a big swimming pool area where last weekend two boys did their best Michael Jackson impressions during a bout of poolside karaoke, Konocti draws lots of families for extended vacations. The barbecue pits outside the suite areas enhance the family feel, as does the availability of supervised activity sessions for kids ages 4 to 13.

The resort's Dancing Springs Spa offers massage and skin treatments. But it's also a full-scale gym, with a large weight room, yoga classes and a lap pool.

By offering so many opportunities for exercise during the day, Konocti helps visitors feel less guilty about indulging in its party-on atmosphere at night. A lively post-concert scene at the resort last weekend entailed a \$5 cover charge, several wrist bands, a showroom concert by the Lost Boys and a 13-items-for-\$13 buffet that showcased the many ways cheese can be fried.

Rancho Cordova residents Lori Cucinotta and Carlos Lora, both 49, moved from concert to cocktails with the help of a resort shuttle ushering guests back and forth to the amphitheater up the hill. Cucinotta and Lora bring their ski boat every year for a long weekend of days on the lake and evenings at the resort's restaurant and lounge.

"We both have high-stress jobs, so this is a good way to kick back and relax," Cucinotta, a registered nurse, said of herself and fiancé Lora, an electrical engineer. The only quibble they have with the resort is that it no longer seems quite as relaxed as it once did. The recent switch of the on-site Classic Rock Café to a white-tablecloth establishment at night, for instance, surprised Lora, he said, since "people who come here want to be in flip-flops and shorts."

The hang-loose atmosphere also is offset somewhat by the many signs reminding concert-goers and resort guests that alcohol is prohibited on the grounds except for in rooms and other designated areas. Upon registering for rooms, guests must sign a contract agreeing to those rules, which, Bennett said, are in accordance with the resort's state Alcoholic Beverage Control license.

As buzz kills go, it's a fairly minor one, since Konocti offers so many forms of recreation for resort guests – and the acts who entertain them. As he's being interviewed in his office, Bennett receives a call from an employee about the personal watercraft that have been designated for musicians – part of the perks package that keeps touring acts coming back to little Kelseyville, Bennett says.

"The one thing we are notorious for in the business is taking great care of the artists," Bennett said. "(Bands will) plan their days off around Konocti."

It's part of the reason the independent music venue can compete for acts with giant promoters such as LiveNation.

"There are not many promoters who can say, 20 years later, that they have still survived in an area dominated by major promoters" Bennett said, noting the proximity of big venues like the Sleep Train amphitheaters in Concord and Wheatland. The big guys "don't like us, but they have almost had to tolerate us ... because we are not going anywhere."

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