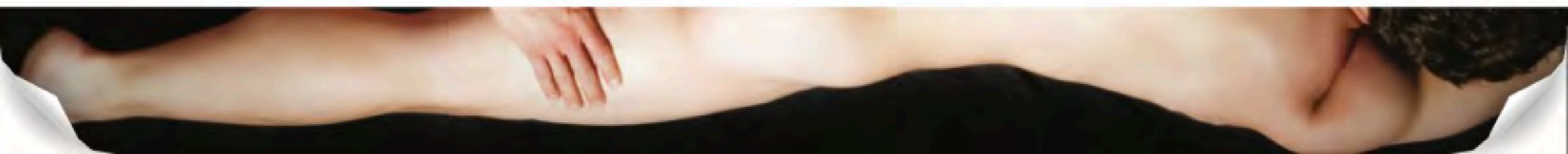




TOM WHITMAN'S

ELEVATION





*"...the people who **come back** every year, come back because they make **such great friends** they keep after the ski week."*

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM: MAMMOTH PARK CITY LAKE TAHOE

When you look up the word elevation the definitions are: 1. The action or fact of elevating or being elevated or; 2. Height above a given level, especially sea level. Both fitting descriptions for the trio of mountain experiences Whitman and his team have created when you think about them. It's all about being high in the sky, whether literally, as on a mountain with a pair of skis or a snowboard, or the emotional high one gets when connecting with friends and having a euphoric blast.

The concept began with Elevation Mammoth 11 years ago, it was a "why not try it" idea of Whitman's after a stretch of super-popular LGBT events throughout Los Angeles. A long line of successful parties, of which I would wager most of us have attended at one time or another. You know the routine—dancing all night to great music, played by amazing DJs, with beautiful men and having a ball!

by joel martens

He didn't start there, his "first" career was as a television producer for MTV and Nickelodeon, filled with live music events and award shows that many would recognize, all dappled with illustrious performers. I asked him to give a little rundown on the events, "my resume reads like a bubble-gum pop checklist: Britney Spears, N'SYNC, Whitney Houston, Backstreet Boys. I did a lot of live music and concert event television stuff. Awards and concert shows were about 60 percent of my career, I worked with a ton of people, it was a good time. I did a bunch of TV and film stuff as well, but that was most of it."

Like any great entrepreneur he looked beyond what he was doing, beginning with the L.A. club scene, "My first events were in 2000 when I was still working at MTV and Nickelodeon in New York. My boyfriend at the time and I were also working together on an animated film, doing the festival circuit and had put together a great promotional event at a gay venue called Felt in L.A. After that, the owners [of Felt] asked me if I would consider producing a regular event and at the time I said, 'no, I have a career already!'"

Whitman didn't move on right away, he was committed to his television production career, but Felt's owners were pretty relentless; "They pursued me for about six months and I finally thought, 'I'll just do it for fun.' That event was called Smack and it was pretty successful. Pretty soon after that Here Lounge opened and they had me produce there. After about six months of doing events and continuing in my regular career, I realized that I had to make a choice; pursue television full time or go off on my own. I was ready to work for myself, I had been at MTV network for a long time and knew that if I stayed there too much longer it was going to be something that I would never leave. So I left, opened an office, hired some staff and the rest is what I call 'gay nightlife history!'"

Curious to hear about his career highlights during the myriad of parties, I figured he must have had great stories because he's been at it for quite a while. "God, there are so many. I had really interesting times working with Whitney Houston, back when she still had it together. I spent an entire day with her and her 'Kevin Kostner *Bodyguard* character' in real life, her actual bodyguard. We were searching out sniper points at Universal's backlot, places where someone could potentially kill her—it was totally crazy. Trying to figure out where someone might hide who was trying to knock off Whitney Houston (laughs)."

I pressed him for any moments when he realized that he had done something remarkable in his career or if he had any defining moments with one famous

person in particular. This was the story... and a great one at that, "Lady Gaga was one of the highlights as far as my LGBT production stuff. I had her perform three times, the first time was at Here Lounge, it was very small on a tiny four-by-eight stage, she had just three dancers—it was great. I had booked her because I thought she was so amazing, her single "Just Dance" was out and really interesting. I booked her six months later for Wonderland on the backlot of Paramount studios and everyone there was like 'what's the deal with this Lady Gaga?' Because I usually book really well-known, big-name performers for that event. I told them, 'just wait' and boom she exploded. Then I booked her for a third time for Cherry Pop at Ultra Suede after she had broken and it was completely crazy, you couldn't move in that place! All the naysayers were like, 'Okay, we get it!'"

You could tell he loved working with Lady Gaga—a lot, "She pulled me aside after the Cherry Pop performance and said to me, 'Hey, I just wanted to tell you thank you. You helped to break me in L.A. because you supported me and believed in what I was doing!' She is just a genuinely sweet, talented, fun woman to work with. There are so many other great stories, I have worked with so many amazing people in New York, L.A. and all over the country—I could fill a book someday!"

That was a bit of Whitman's backstory, now on to the highlight of this article: Elevation Ski Events—all three of them, Mammoth, Utah and the latest, Lake Tahoe. I asked how he began and why he chose Mammoth Mountain as the starting point. "Mammoth was

my home mountain when I was skiing and racing for UCLA; I would go up there to spend the weekends regularly. Even after I graduated I spent a great deal of time up there. A friend and I talked about doing a ski weekend, he was from Whistler, BC, home of the largest LGBT ski week in America and we thought what about Mammoth? Starting out it was very much a test case, we sent out emails to see what would happen. With very little effort, 300-400 guys came out and I realized that it could actually become something very real. We built it up the next year, doubling in size for each of the next few years, going from a few events over the course of two days, to what it is now, nine big events over the course of five days!"

After a time, Whitman realized that there was more potential, there were many more resorts out there, so he started looking for another location to host. That was four years ago and Park City, Utah was the place he chose. We talked about why he wanted to grow the series, "My goal is to build these events into big, national/international LGBT events. Mammoth had grown to be so large; it had become the third largest LGBT ski week in North America, just after Whistler's in Canada. So I decided that it would be a great thing to do it again somewhere else."

About why he chose Park City, Utah; "There are so many great resorts that would be perfect for a great ski week, so when I did my due diligence searching for another spot in the U.S., Park City was an obvious choice. It's such a good resort, is so easy to get to and has so many great options and a ton of large venues. Park City is everything that a ski resort should be; it's





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rustic, has cute stores and great shopping and yet it's not totally glammed up like Vail or Aspen. It's not Rodeo Drive, but it's lovely and quaint, just big enough so that there are wonderful restaurants, with plenty of things to do."

After four years of success there, the bug (or should I say snow-bunny?) to grow continued, hence the latest in the Elevation series beginning in 2014—Lake Tahoe. "Tahoe literally came about very last minute, North Lake Tahoe actually reached out to me. They said they had heard stories for years about my other events and asked if I would consider doing one up there." He wasn't sure about doing it because it was so late in the game to start planning such an event. "Having learned my lessons throughout the years, I understand that there is a lot that goes into putting these together successfully, including community support, things like that."

Squaw Valley and Northstar were the two options and both resorts made the experience easy for him, flying him up, setting up all the necessary meetings and as he said, "made it pretty much impossible for me to say no." Whitman continued, "They were really into it and convinced me because of their commitment to the idea. Both are amazing venues and would have been great, but Squaw Valley seemed to be just a little more gung-ho about it. I also had a little bit of personal history with Squaw and knew the mountain so I think that might have helped the decision along." He and his team decided "let's do it"

and as he said, "we've been running ever since then!"

I was curious about the similarities so I asked him to draw some comparisons around each event. "Squaw Valley is very much like Mammoth in that it's a contained village, you can have all your events within walking distance to the mountain. It makes for a much more fun, localized experience because you end up seeing the same people." He predicts that they'll have about 500-600 people to start, but like the others it will grow, "Mammoth started small but has grown way beyond that now." Continuing with the comparison he had this to say, "Mammoth is largely a local event, it's probably about 65 percent Californian and the rest are from out of state. Utah is completely different in that people are from all over the place; there really is no specific feeder market for it. Sure, there are locals who come but it's not the majority. It's filled with people from the South, the East and West Coast and international visitors. It's a much more diverse crowd geographically. We had a bunch from Australia last year, some from Argentina, all over the world really."

Regarding the demographics of the newest of his mountain escapes, Lake Tahoe, "Tahoe I think is going to be a combination of both Northern and Southern Californians, since Los Angeles and San Francisco are the feeder markets. It's easier to get to than Mammoth because of the Reno airport, because of that there will be a broader range of visitors."

There was a fondness in his voice when he talked

about what it was like to start these events, "It's really kind of fun in the beginning when it's a bit intermittent to start. Those people who start coming early on kind of claim some ownership to the event because they start out with the first year. I say this all the time, 'the people who come back every year, come back because they make such great friends they keep after the ski week.'"

As usual at his events, Whitman has great DJs set up and as of press time, he was working on finalizing performers. But like the other Elevation events, Lake Tahoe's schedule will be very full—Après Ski party in the afternoon, meet ups and then of course the legendary nighttime events. Squaw Valley is a huge mountain with a beautiful resort, so like at Mammoth, white bandanas are given out to identify festivalgoers. Whitman chuckled and said, "Look for them, people tie them around their arms, on their heads, or legs so you can tell how many LGBTs are up there. You can tell he really enjoys the process and is looking forward to what people have to say, "I'm so excited to see how people respond to Lake Tahoe, to see how they compare it to the other two events. I've really committed to the mountain, we're not going to do just a one-year deal, we're looking at it long-term."

Lucky for those of us who love this particular winter sport. It's time to dust off that snowboard and those skis, which ever you prefer and, "hit the slopes."

For details on all three Elevation events, see listing above.