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SmartAlec offers tours of Christmas lights

By Jan Hill, Journal Correspondent Saturday, December 22, 2007

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Looking for a new way to enjoy the Christmas lights in Rapid City?

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Ken Jones of SmartAlec Tours might have just the ticket for you.

Jones and his wife, Melita, started the family-owned business, SmartAlec Tours, this past summer, sending visitors on self-guided GPS-based tours to attractions throughout the Black Hills area. Now, they've taken the concept into the holidays by offering self-guided GPS tours or a bus tour of Christmas lights in Rapid City.

He said the goal behind the Christmas lights idea is twofold: to make SmartAlec Tours a year-round business, and generate interest in the downtown Rapid City area.

Along with the Tour of Lights, SmartAlec also is sponsoring a contest in which businesses and homes within the Rapid City limits are eligible to compete for cash prizes in four categories: Best Traditional, Best Humorous, Best Light Show and Best North Pole.

Everyone who buys a ticket for the event will be able to vote for his or her favorite displays at the conclusion of each particular tour. The winners will be announced Christmas Day, and prizes include \$250 to the People's Choice winner, \$100 cash for the Best Festive Business, awards valued at \$100 to the open category winners and awards valued at \$50 to the runners-up.

Downtown businesses are offering discounts to those taking the Tour of Lights, such as 50 percent off cheesy artichoke dip at The Firehouse Restaurant, and 25 percent off all drinks at Alternative Fuel.

According to Jones, the GPS-guided tour of lights may be the first of its kind anywhere, adding that GPS is the "next revolution in touring." He explained that the system used by SmartAlec Tours is not a navigational unit, but a touring system, in which he pre-programs the device for the customer.

"This is not a 'gadgety' type of deal," he said. "They just need to stick the unit inside their windshield, plug the FM transmitter into the headphone jack, tune the radio to 102.9 and go."

Those electing to view the lights with the aid of a GPS device will enjoy music, stories and information related to a specific location as the vehicle passes it.

"Contestants can even record a 15-second personal message heard by the riders as they drive by their display," said Jones. The two-hour, GPS-guided tours can start anytime after 5:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and all the devices must be returned by 10 p.m.

For those who would rather ride than drive, the Tour of Lights coach will run Thursdays through Saturdays from the Roam'n Around Travel Store at three departure times, 5:30 p.m., 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.

"Our goal is to create a holiday event for the entire city, centered around the downtown area. People can tie in shopping, dinner or a cup of coffee downtown before or after the tour. The hour-and-a-half- to two-hour time slots make that possible," Jones said.

Church groups, office parties, senior citizen centers and other community organizations have shown considerable interest in the bus tours.

The Tour of Lights route begins in downtown Rapid City, travels west through neighborhoods in the West Main, Storybook Island and South Canyon area, follows Catron Boulevard to Highway 16 over Skyline Drive, then down Flormann Street, up West Boulevard and back downtown. Although the Tour of Lights coach will not stop at Storybook Island, people driving their own vehicles on GPS-guided tours will have the option of adding a walk through the park to their tour.

Jones has hopes that his Tour of Lights and Contest will spur interest in the Rapid City downtown area, as well as encourage more and more individuals and businesses to create Christmas light displays.

"The lighting at Rockefeller Center in New York City started with a small event," he said. "This isn't an impossible thing. Stringing lights is such an easy way to be festive."

If you go

Story Photo



Ken Jones and his wife Melita own and operate SmartAlec Tours in Rapid City. GPS guided tours using your own vehicle cost \$15 for two hours or guided tours lasting an hour and a half aboard the Tour of Lights coach cost \$7 per seat, or \$6 per seat for groups of 30 or more. (Ryan Soderlin/Journal staff)

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When: Bus tour runs Thursdays through Saturdays at three departure times, 5:30 p.m., 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.

Where: The Tour of Lights route begins in downtown Rapid City and travels throughout Rapid City.

To make reservations or for more information on the SmartAlec Tour of Lights, call 348-4456, go to www.smartalecpgstours.com. Due to limited availability, reservations are recommended for the tours but walk-up tickets are also available Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Roam'n Around Travel Store, 616 Main St., where tours originate.

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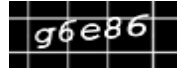
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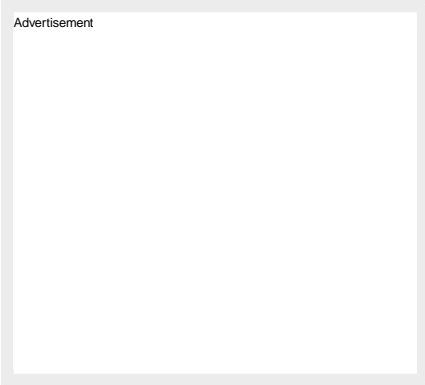
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