

Reno lets the good times roll

In September, the city goes into overdrive

By [Charles Leocha](#)

Travel columnist

[Trips.com](#)

Updated: 1:37 p.m. ET Aug. 17, 2005

Reno, Nevada, has been working overtime to keep visitors coming, over and over again. The town once known for walk-up marriages, quickie divorces and craps has been rehabilitating itself over the past decade. Today it is one of the event capitals of the country, and September is its showcase month.

In fact, Reno and the surrounding Tahoe region present a year-round calendar of events, including winter carnivals and film festivals in the winter, the Reno River Festival and the Lake Tahoe and Reno jazz festivals in the spring, and fabulous fireworks and Shakespeare in the summer.

But in September, the city goes into overdrive.

Over Labor Day weekend, John Ascuaga's Nugget resort hotel, in Sparks, will present the 17th annual Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off, the biggest barbecue in the country. The festival, which runs September 1–5, brings together 25 rib cookers from around the country for a fierce but friendly competition that draws more than 300,000 lip-smacking, belly-rubbing rib enthusiasts.

The contestants' names read like a rib-lovers' colorful hall of fame. Howling Coyote from Illinois, Rasta Joe's from Indiana, Checkered Pig from Virginia, Butch's Smack Your Lips from New Jersey, Moonshiners from Kentucky, Famous Dave's from Minnesota, and TX Outlaws from Texas are some of the all-star cookers.

The sweet, smoky haze that hangs over the pits is almost intoxicating. The barbecuers will grill more than 150,000 pounds of ribs over hickory, mesquite and cherry wood. Pick your favorite sauce: The southern-style ribs have a tangy sauce that drips down hands and arms, while the northern-style ribs are coated with sweet sauce that sticks to fingers and faces.

Gotta have some good country music while you wait for those ribs, so check out the entertainment, which runs almost nonstop over the five days. The main stage events, all free, will feature Sol' Jibe, Collin Raye, Paul Thorn, 38 Special and Cracker. It's a very satisfying weekend, all around.

The next weekend, September 9–11, Virginia City hosts the [Virginia City International Camel Races](#) and Reno hosts the Great Reno Balloon Race.

The [camel races](#) have been running for 45 years. The camels race down C Street past Old West saloons, casinos, souvenir stores, candy shops, and more Old West saloons. And it's not just camels: Virginia City also runs ostrich races and cattle races. The animals race in preliminary heats on Friday and Saturday, then line up for the finals on Sunday.

You've got to see it to believe it. In fact, the races started out as a hoax. A newspaper editor fabricated a story about the races back in 1957, just to fill space in the paper; a follow-up story, also fabricated, explained why the races had to be cancelled. This fabrication was repeated for

_____ lifts off on the same weekend. Each day at 6:30 a.m., early-risers will witness a mass ascension of more than 100 colorful balloons. The morning sky decorated with these massive balloons is spectacular.

The main race is what balloonists call a Hound and Hare. Two balloons (the hares) are released and then the other hundred or so balloons (the hounds) rise up to chase them across the sky. The object is to bring your hound as close as possible to the landing spot of your hare, then throw down a bean bag where X marks the spot.

Even earlier in the morning, at 5:30 a.m., the Dawn Patrol takes off in the dark. The balloons glow with the bursts of flames used to heat the air that fill the balloons. The glowing orbs seem to magically dance across the sky. Dawn Patrol crews are made up of a handful of real balloon pros who know how to handle the tricky changes in air flow that occur as the sun rises later in the day.

If you can't make it to Reno, Sparks or Virginia City for one of these events, come another weekend. I'm sure something fun will be happening.

Charles Leocha is nationally-recognized expert on saving money and the publisher of Tripso. He is also the Boston-based author of "SkiSnowboard America & Canada." [E-mail him](#) or [visit his Web site](#). Want to sound off about one of his columns? Try visiting [Leocha's forum](#).

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