

Sandusky resort doubles its size as Ohioans warm up to water parks

Family fun goes indoors

By Rick Armon, Beacon Journal

Sandusky OH, Dec 29, 2007 --- Sarah Cable hopped onto a single water ski and surfed around on a giant, man-made wave inside the Kalahari Resort water park. The 20-year-old Sandusky resident darted left and right, showing off her skills on one of the park's most popular attractions.

"I love it here," Cable said after her turn on the FlowRider, which shoots water quickly toward skiers, allowing them to surf without moving forward — as long as they keep their balance. "This place is absolutely amazing."

Kalahari unveiled a 93,000-square-foot expansion last week, and now touts its Sandusky location — at 173,000 square feet — as the largest hotel indoor water park in the United States.

The bragging rights, though, aren't expected to last long.

Hotel indoor water parks are the hottest lodging concept this decade, experts said. Families love them for the entertainment. And, more importantly, hotel owners adore them because they can charge higher room rates and boost hotel occupancy year-round.

"It's really that aspect that's caused the current growth, if not explosion, in water-park resort development," said John Gerner, managing director of Leisure Business Advisors, a consulting company in Richmond, Va.

Forty-eight new hotel indoor water parks were expected to open this year and another 49 were under construction or set to break ground, according to an industry report released in July. Today, there are more than 180 in the United States — a 283 percent jump in the last five years.

With so many markets untapped, industry analysts expect that trend to continue.

Earlier this year, an Akron-area businessman proposed a hotel and indoor/outdoor water park near Lodi in southern Medina County, but county Commissioner Patricia Geissman said she believes the project is dead. A spokeswoman for the project said Friday that was inaccurate, but declined further comment

Idea that worked

The first hotel indoor water park was created by accident in 1994.

Stan Anderson, owner of the Polynesian Water Park Resort in Wisconsin Dells, Wis., wanted to fill more rooms at his hotel so he added a water-play feature. Reservations jumped and competitors began to copy the concept.

Today, there are 21 water-park resorts in Wisconsin Dells. In Sandusky, there are three: Kalahari, Great Wolf Lodge and Castaway Bay; and a fourth, Maui Sands, is slated to open in April.

Anderson's decision also has spawned indoor water-park chains, such as Kalahari and Great Wolf Lodge.

"By 2000, word had gotten out that this concept was a boost to the lodging industry," said **William Haralson**, president of William L. Haralson & Associates Inc., a water-park consulting company in Alto, N.M. "It was like dropping a pebble in a pond and seeing the rings go out."

He and Jeff Coy, of JLC Hospitality Consulting in Cave Creek, Ariz., compile a report each year detailing trends in the hotel water-park resort industry. They also will hold a workshop on hotel water parks on February 28 & 29, 2008 at Kalahari in Sandusky. For more information about the workshop, go to www.hotelwaterparkworkshop.com.

Haralson expects about 400 people.

While the industry appears to be going crazy over the concept, Haralson and Gerner warned that indoor water parks aren't automatically successful and there is a potential for saturating a market. In the past, indoor water-park resorts were built near tourist destinations, but now they are moving into large residential areas, Gerner said.

"These types of projects sometimes lend themselves to what I call the 'Build it and they will come' philosophy," he said. "Sometimes that happens but really these type of projects rely on a good strong market. Either the resident market or tourist market."

The average hotel occupancy in the U.S. is 63 percent, with average room rates expected to hit \$103 this year, according to **Haralson and Coy's report**. It's difficult to know how hotel indoor water parks perform as a group, they said.

But some hotel indoor water parks average 26 percent better on occupancy and top locations average more than \$200 for room rates.

A Saturday room rate in January for two adults and two children ranges from \$259 to \$799 a night at Kalahari in Sandusky, according to the company Web site. People also can purchase an all-day pass for the water park only for \$34.

Adults welcome

Haralson considers Kalahari — which carries an African theme throughout — one of the best because it caters to adults as well as kids. The company has locations in Wisconsin Dells and Sandusky and plans to build a \$200 million facility in Fredericksburg, Va.

The Kalahari locations include convention centers, spas, restaurants, bars, shops and game rooms. They are Vegas-esque in scale.

The Sandusky location has 884 hotel rooms. Hallways are lined with authentic African art, including hand-carved, wooden sculptures, masks, and fabrics adorning the walls. A lion cub is in a small glass enclosure in the lobby.

The indoor water park — there's also an outdoor one — is huge. It includes a wave pool, hot tubs, fast-moving slides, meandering rivers, little kids' play area, multiple bars and thatch hut cabanas for rent. One giant wall is painted as a savannah extending out from the water park. A portion of the roof is made of Texlon, allowing sunlight in.

Don't expect to jump into a regular swimming pool for a few laps. "You want that, go to the Y," joked Kristann Hartley, marketing manager for Kalahari. The water park has been packed since the expansion opened Dec. 20, she said.

On Thursday, there were about 2,000 people inside bobbing up and down in the wave pool, coasting lazily on a raft, or waiting in line for one of the slides and other attractions.

Outside, the temperature was about 30 degrees. Inside, it was 86.

"Just the idea of being in a waterpark in the middle of the winter in Ohio is pretty cool," Chris Strolia-Davis, 36, of Fairborn said.

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