

What Is a Waterpark --- Really?

Blending Swimming Pools, Amusement/Theme Parks, Hotels & Resorts Calls for New Definitions

By Jeff Coy and Bill Haralson

In the beginning, there was the Garden of Eden, the first theme park designed as paradise on earth until somebody took a bite of the apple and it was renamed Paradise Lost. Years later, God told Noah, "I wanna build a waterpark, so get ready!" After the Great Flood receded from the earth, the attractions industry started to evolve from pleasure gardens in the 1500s to the amusement parks, theme parks and waterparks of today.

First, there were amusement parks

In 1846, Lake Compounce Amusement Park opened in Bristol CT. Cedar Point in Sandusky OH opened in 1870. At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the Ferris Wheel first appeared, and Paul Boynton created Water Chutes on the south side of Chicago. Two years later, Boynton opened a second Water Chutes on Coney Island in New York. Coney Island became the center of the amusement park industry up until 1920.

Second, there were theme parks

In 1955, Walt Disney opened Disneyland, the nation's first theme park at a cost of \$17 million. It was different than the typical amusement park. It introduced several new themed areas where visitors could feel safe while visiting other lands. Of course, the central focus of Disneyland was always the rides --- you know, the roller coasters that could be found at typical amusement parks. But Disney mixed new concepts with the basic rides --- things like heavy theming, sculptured environments, TV characters, movies sets and water. A paddle wheeler steamed up Mississippi River, a safari boat toured the Amazon River and new technology rides splashed down into water. The theme park era was born.

In 1961, Six Flags Over Texas opened as the first successful regional theme park to 1.3 million visitors. Within two years, a water ride called the Log Flume became the most popular ride and was installed in parks around the country.

Third, theme parks evolved into waterparks

In 1964, George Millay created Sea World and took the idea of sea-life parks to new levels. George Millay is a creative genius and the unchallenged "Father of the Waterpark." In 1977, he challenged the amusement industry forever when he opened the gates of Wet 'N Wild, the world's first waterpark. As biographer Tim O'Brien writes, Millay is "a man who has turned water into gold, a modern day Poseidon." He launched today's waterpark industry.

In 1971, Disney World opened on 27,500 acres in Orlando FL at a cost of \$250 million. During the 1970s, many inner city amusement parks closed while corporations invested in larger regional theme parks. Later, the major theme parks added outdoor waterparks.

In the early 1950s, a water ski show debuted in Wisconsin Dells WI and duck tours, using water/land vehicles, became popular. During the 1980s, several outdoor waterparks opened in Wisconsin Dells and grew into huge enterprises. Jack and Turk Waterman built Noah's Ark and later sold it to current owner Tim Gantz. The Hellands built Riverview Park & Water World and the Matteis built Familyland. Many of the hotel owners constructed slides and built water attractions for their outdoor swimming pools --- making Wisconsin Dells a waterpark haven.

Fourth, outdoor waterparks came indoors

In 1994, Stan Anderson, generally acknowledged as the "pioneer of the first indoor waterpark resort", installed some water *gizmo* in his indoor pool, and weekend occupancy skyrocketed in his Polynesian Resort. Within a year, Anderson's partner, Tom Lucke and Peter Helland built an indoor waterpark as part of their new Wilderness Resort. In 1997, Jack and Turk Waterman opened Black Wolf Lodge with an indoor waterpark that was later sold to Great Lakes Companies and renamed Great Wolf Lodge. Tim Mattei opened his 65,000 sf indoor waterpark Treasure Island in 1999. And in 2000, Todd Nelson opened the Kalahari Resort, which now boasts having a 125,000 sf indoor waterpark.

Today, we have indoor and outdoor waterparks that range from a 60-room limited service hotel with a 2,000 sf indoor waterplay area to Typhoon Lagoon and Blizzard Beach at Disney World. We have waterparks that are public & private, chain & independent and big & small. Some are self-standing and others are attached to hotels or integrated into the overall design of ski resorts, golf resorts and conference centers. It's been a little confusing lately --- until somebody asked the question:

What is a waterpark --- really?

Everybody knows what a swimming pool is, right? You have outdoor swimming pools and indoor swimming pools. So far, that's pretty easy to understand. But, when you combine Disney World, Sea World, Wet 'N Wild, Great Wolf Lodge and Kalahari Waterpark Resort & Convention Center, things start to get more difficult to understand.

Recently, Aquatics International magazine editor Gary Thill asked Jeff Coy and Bill Haralson to judge some aquatic facilities for his Best of 2004 Issue. The two consultants had been struggling with categories and definitions for the last three years as part of their industry research for the World Waterpark Association. For example, What's the difference between a glorified swimming pool, an aquatic center and a waterpark? When does a hotel with an indoor waterpark reach the status of a hotel waterpark resort? Does size really matter?

Here is our answer to those questions --- our attempt to categorize, define and provide a way to think and talk about waterparks and their future adaptations.

Criteria for Waterpark Categories & Definitions

What is a waterpark --- really? When thinking about ways to compare waterparks, several questions emerge:

- Location: Is it outdoors or indoors?
- Ownership: Who owns it? Public or private?
- Management: Non-profit or profit, public or private?
- Features: Low or high entertainment value?
- Size: Small, medium, large or mega-sized?
- Affiliation: Is it part of a national brand/chain or independent?
- Design Integration: Is it self-standing, attached or integrated with lodging and other recreation resort facilities?

Outdoor Vs Indoor Waterparks. Today, the biggest distinction among waterparks is whether they are outdoors or indoors. Outdoor waterparks evolved from theme parks and outdoor swimming pools. Indoor waterparks were an extension of hotels, resorts and indoor swimming pools. Outdoor waterparks are loosely spread over acres. Indoor waterparks are tightly compacted into cubic spaces. There are over 400 outdoor waterparks in the USA compared to about 76 indoor waterparks. Outdoor waterparks stand alone and attract day visitors. Indoor waterparks are attached to lodging and attract overnight guests. Outdoor waterparks are a mature industry while indoor waterparks are a growth industry.

Public Vs Private Ownership. Another major difference in waterparks is ownership. Cities, counties and park districts have long owned both outdoor and indoor swimming pools. Built with taxpayer money, these public swimming pools were pretty austere --- intended for swimming tournaments or community recreation. "In the 1970s, these public facilities became more sexy," according to Judith Leblein of Water Technology Inc. "They called them Community/Family Aquatic Centers, as more programs, services and food were added." In fact, the term *aquatic center* is used more in the public sector while the term *waterpark* is used more in the private sector, according to Leblein. With the addition of waterslides, rivers and more thrills, the more competitive municipalities and park districts have adopted the term *waterpark*. Five of the most effectively-managed public waterparks include: Hyland Hills Water World in Federal Heights CO, NRH2O in N. Richland Hills TX, Magic Waters in Rockford IL, Lake Lanier Island GA and Deep River Waterpark in Lake County IN.

In contrast, small business owners and corporations have owned outdoor and indoor swimming pools, amusement parks, theme parks, hotels and resorts. Built with equity and borrowed money, these privately-owned water attractions were designed to satisfy market demand for recreation and entertainment. Privately-owned waterparks were built with high entertainment value.

Management: Non-profit vs For-Profit. Public facilities tend to be managed by public employees and operate at a deficit subsidized by taxpayer dollars. Very few public waterpark owners have contracted with a private management company --- but the trend is up. The more competitive municipalities and park districts have adopted break-even or profit goals for their facilities and have contracted with professional management. Privately-owned facilities tend to be managed by the owner's employees or a third-party management company on a profitable basis.

Features: Low to High Entertainment Value. Publicly-owned & managed pools, aquatic centers and waterparks are typically designed for community recreation by local taxpayers. Features include learn-to-swim lessons, seniors' days, handicapped access, day camps and birthday parties. Facilities are pretty basic. Privately-owned & managed pools, hotels, resorts and waterparks tend to be designed with high entertainment value to attract customers with discretionary dollars to spend. Features include waterslides, activity pools, kiddie pools, hot tubs, lazy rivers, wave pools, water coasters, heavy theming and animated characters. Facilities are state of the art. However, many public facilities have upgraded to better compete with private facilities.

Size: Does It Really Matter? Yes, it does, especially when trying to contrast and compare similar properties. Developers, consultants and lenders all want to know what the *apples to apples* comparisons are --- you know, the competitors, development costs, operating expense ratios etc. You can't compare David with Goliath! You gotta know who you are up against. And when WWA, IAAPA and Aquatics International give out their annual awards, you want the contest to be fair, don't you? Outdoor waterparks are basically measured by their annual attendance. We recommend attendance categories as follows:

<i>Outdoor Waterparks With Attendance</i>	<i>Approximate Number in Field</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Under 100,000	200	Rapids on the Reservoir
100,000 to 299,999	100	Discovery Cove, Wild Waters
300,000 to 499,999	50	Six Flags, Hyland Hills Water World, Soak City
500,000 to 999,999	7-8	Raging Waters, Water Country USA, Noah's Ark
Over 1,000,000	3-4	Typhoon Lagoon, Wet 'N Wild, Schlitterbahn

Regarding indoor waterparks, only one is self-standing, not attached to lodging, and that is H2Oasis in Anchorage AK. Some hotels have indoor waterparks that are so small (less than 10,000 square feet) we hesitate to call them waterparks or resorts. We recommend the following categories for hotels with small indoor waterparks:

<i>Hotel Indoor Waterparks With Square Feet</i>	<i>Approximate Number In Field</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Under 5,000	12	AmericInn, Ashland WI
5,000 to 9,999	14	Ramada Airport, Spokane WA

A resort by definition can be a location or a facility. For example, a hotel in a resort location, such as Wisconsin Dells, may be called a resort. Or a hotel waterpark can have such a high entertainment value that the facility is called a resort. In our opinion, hotels with indoor waterparks over 10,000 sf may be called hotel waterpark resorts --- due to their high

entertainment value. Therefore, we recommend the following categories for hotel waterpark resorts:

<i>Hotel Waterpark Resorts With Square Feet</i>	<i>Approximate Number In Field</i>	<i>Examples</i>
10,000 to 19,999	21	Cranberry Lodge, Holiday Inn Amana
20,000 to 29,999	9	Grand Harbor Resort, Arrowood Resort
30,000 to 49,999	13	Great Wolf Lodge, Polynesian Resort
50,000 to 99,999	4	Treasure Island, Castaway Bay Resort
Over 100,000	3	Wilderness, Kalahari, Splash Lagoon

Affiliation With a National Brand/Chain Vs Independent. Outdoor waterparks affiliated with a national brand include: Disney, Wet 'N Wild and Six Flags. Chains or large corporations owning multiple outdoor waterparks include: Walt Disney Attractions, Six Flags Inc, Universal Studios Recreation Group, Anheuser-Busch Theme Parks, Cedar Fair Ltd, Paramount Parks, Palace Entertainment, Grupo Magico Internacional, Tussauds Group and Blackpool Pleasure Beach. The largest independents are: Schlitterbahn, Raging Waters, Water Country USA, Noah's Ark and Soak City.

Indoor waterparks affiliated with a national brand include many hotel brands: AmericInn, Baymont, Best Western, Comfort Suites, Country Inn & Suites by Carlson, Days Inn, Hawthorn Suites, Hilton, Hojo, Holiday Inn, Marriott, Microtel, Quality Inn, Ramada, Sleep Inn and Wingate. Great Lakes Companies of Madison WI is establishing its Great Wolf Lodges as an emerging brand name in the waterpark resort industry. Kalahari Resort of Wisconsin Dells WI is expanding its name to a second location in Sandusky OH. Chains or large corporations owning multiple indoor waterparks include: Great Lakes Companies and the Marcus Corporation of Milwaukee WI. The largest independents include Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort, Kalahari Resort, Treasure Island and Lodge at Cedar Creek, all in Wisconsin, and Scott's Splash Lagoon in Erie PA, H2Oasis in Anchorage AK and Castaway Bay Resort in Sandusky OH.

Self-Standing Vs Attached or Integrated. Outdoor waterparks are considered self-standing or self-contained. Some may have lodging on site, adjacent or nearby. Regarding self-standing indoor waterparks, almost all are publicly-owned. There is only one self-standing privately-owned, commercial indoor waterpark --- H2Oasis in Anchorage AK. All other indoor waterparks are attached to hotels or integrated into a resort. Future design trends include a combination of outdoor & indoor waterparks integrated into a larger recreational resort environment.

New Waterpark Categories & Definitions

Finally, under pressure from industry analysts and lenders to achieve some *apples to apples* comparability in this hybrid water world and to help editors create awards categories, we present our first draft of new categories and definitions for discussion. Here goes:

- Outdoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, community swimming pools
- Outdoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, family aquatic centers

- Outdoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, waterparks
- Outdoor, publicly-owned, privately-managed, waterparks
- Outdoor, privately-owned, waterparks, under 100,000 attendance
- Outdoor, privately-owned, waterparks, 100,000 to 300,000 attendance
- Outdoor, privately-owned, waterparks, 300,000 to 500,000 attendance
- Outdoor, privately-owned, waterparks, 500,000 to 1,000,000 attendance
- Outdoor, privately-owned, waterparks, over 1,000,000 attendance

- Indoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, community swimming pools
- Indoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, family aquatic centers
- Indoor, publicly-owned, publicly-managed, waterparks
- Indoor, publicly-owned, privately-managed, waterparks
- Indoor, privately-owned, self-standing, waterparks
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel indoor waterpark, under 5,000 sq ft
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel indoor waterpark, 5,000 to 9,999 sq ft
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel waterpark resort, 10,000 to 19,999 sq ft
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel waterpark resort, 30,000 to 49,999 sq ft
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel waterpark resorts, 50,000 to 99,999 sq ft
- Indoor, privately-owned, hotel waterpark resorts, over 100,000 sq ft

Let the discussions begin!

Data sources we used for this article include: World Waterpark Association; International Association of Amusement Parks & Attractions; Amusement Business, Hotel Waterpark Resort Research & Consulting; US Popular Culture: Project Paper, by Leena Hyttinen, May 8, 1998; National Amusement Park Historical Association; Coney Island History Site, Jeffrey Stanton, 1997; The Ferris Wheel; Guide to World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago 1893, Bruce R. Schulman, 1996-2002.

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