

Indoor waterparks make a splash

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The Kalahari Resort offers Robert and Jennifer Buchholz of Green Bay and Kendra Beahm, 5, a respite from winter.

WISCONSIN DELLS, Wis. 1/02/2003 - The weather on this late December afternoon is worthy of a Green Bay Packer home playoff game: skies the color of slush and a wind-chill factor flirting with single digits.

But within the balmy, well-chlorinated confines of the African-theme Kalahari Resort and more than a dozen other local hotels, swimsuits are clearly the clothing of choice. Rafts and wave pools outnumber parkas and ice scrapers, and Wisconsin's infamously frozen tundra has been transformed into the indoor waterpark capital of the world.

"I'd rather be in Jamaica," concedes Milwaukee's Daleen Fitzgerald, relaxing in a lounge chair as she watches her dripping daughters Brittany, 13, and Meredith, 9, scamper up five flights of steps in the Kalahari's arena-size aquatic playground.

The girls' destination: the Botswana Blast, a 600-foot-long roller coaster that uses water and gravity to propel its gleefully screaming riders through a maze of tunnels.

"We're not cold-weather people," she adds, "and this is much easier and cheaper than flying to the Caribbean."

Plenty of other cabin-feverish families seem to agree. What started a decade ago as a local hotel owner's modest attempt to pad a short summer season in a honky-tonk Midwestern tourist mecca has turned into a tsunami that extends from Anchorage to Niagara Falls.

We're not talking kidney-shaped pools with volleyball nets. Think 50-person Jacuzzis, meandering rivers

dotted with bobbing inner tubes and a 40-mph flume ride that requires an iron gut and a willingness to endure the occasional wedgie. (Better known as the Toilet Bowl, the Kalahari's Tanzanian Twister spins riders through a high-banked, funnel-like contraption before unceremoniously dumping them — sometimes headfirst — into a 9 1/2-foot-deep pool.)

"The conventional wisdom in the waterpark business was that once Labor Day was over, you'd put away your bathing suits until spring. But these places are spending a lot of money to prove you can say 'Weather be damned,' " says theme park expert Arthur Levine, who tracks industry developments on the Web site About.com.

Oh, baby, it's warm inside

Stand-alone indoor waterparks remain popular, notably in Germany, England and at the world's largest shopping center, Canada's Edmonton Mall. Anchorage's H{-2}Oasis, billed as "A Tropical Island in the Last Frontier," is scheduled to open this month. Another park, part of a \$2.2 billion entertainment and shopping project planned for Syracuse, N.Y., in 2006, includes plans for a surfing pool and a 20-foot-wide, 5-mile-long river.

But most development in the USA revolves around cold-weather resorts, particularly in the Upper Midwest. Fifty hotel-based indoor waterparks are operating in 13 states, and another dozen are opening or under construction in 2003. When it debuts next month just off I-90 in Erie, Pa., Splash Lagoon will allow still-damp guests to check in at one of two attached hotels, a Holiday Inn Express and Residence Inn by Marriott. (A Comfort Inn opens this spring.)

"The fact that families are willing to travel up to 200 miles for a hotel weekend during the cold of winter speaks volumes about the drawing power of the waterpark resort concept," says **Jeff Coy**, a hospitality consultant in Rochester, Minn. "The hotel indoor waterpark has proven so successful at increasing the bottom line, a whole new industry has emerged."

No destination illustrates that better than the Wisconsin Dells. Set amid the sandstone bluffs and rolling farmland of the Wisconsin River valley about an hour's drive north of the state capital, Madison, the Dells has supplanted the surrounding natural scenery with what *Roadside America* describes as "a steamy, miles-long, cheese-dense strip of motels, tourist traps and singular attractions."

Home to a Dungeon of Horrors, Serpent Safari and the World's Only Underwater Go-Kart Track, it's been a longtime favorite of blue-collar, beer-bellied Midwesterners — most of whom vanished from September through May.

"We used to joke that after Labor Day, you could shoot a cannon down Main Street and not hit anyone," Kalahari owner and Dells native Todd Nelson says.

A flood of off-season revenue

Not anymore. Visitor spending during the Dells' traditional nine-month-long off-season has more than doubled in five years to an estimated \$300 million in 2002, and the area now draws 30,000 winter tourists to an annual Flake Out Festival. (On tap at this year's shindig, Jan. 18-19: frozen-turkey bowling, ice carving and mitten football.)

But those more intent on thawing out than embracing the cold gravitate to one of the Dells' 18 hotel

indoor waterparks. Though most are little more than motels with covered swimming pools and a few aquatic features, competition — and room rates, which averaged \$114 last year vs. about \$45 for Dells properties without waterparks — is heating up.

The Great Wolf Lodge, which opened in 1997, features an Aveda spa, 3-D interactive theater and a North Woods motif, from the bear pelts in the lobby and snowshoes-as-art in the guest rooms to a 40,000-square-foot indoor waterpark that shoots riders from the mouths of ersatz totem poles.

Newcomer Kalahari opened two years ago and has gone through six expansions, including a just-completed \$12.5 million addition that gives it bragging rights as the country's biggest indoor waterpark.

Not for long: Rival resort The Wilderness' 70,000-square-foot addition, Wild West Waterpark, opens next month with such interactive features as a land-based dynamite box that lets parents "blast" their unsuspecting offspring in a nearby wave pool.

Given the piercing decibel levels and not-so-subtle ground rules ("Swim Diapers Required!" reads one sign at the popular Treasure Island Resort), the Dells' indoor aquatic parks are clearly family affairs. Their prime market is school-age youngsters, who frolic for hours with or without Mom and Dad in tow. (Most indoor rides don't have height restrictions, and lifeguards are posted throughout the parks.)

But in the depths of a Wisconsin winter, romance can be as close as the Kalahari's new adults-only fitness pool, where Katherine Chu, 25, and Pat Harms, 24, both of Rockton, Ill., are cuddling on a gloomy Saturday afternoon.

As strains from the Beach Boys' *Kokomo* mingle with screams from nearby Victoria Falls, the couple cheerfully acknowledge that they haven't been out of the water all day.

"We can still act like kids here," Chu says. "And at this time of year, you take what you can get."