

Minnesota Riding Wave of Waterpark Popularity

By Tim Harlow, Minneapolis Star Tribune

September 11, 2004 --- The state's largest indoor water park opened Friday in Brooklyn Park, but the Grand Rios Resort and Conference Center won't be the biggest for long.

With its six state-of-the-art body and inner-tube slides -- including "The Hurricane," on which riders zoom down a dark, three-story, serpentine tube at up to 45 miles per hour, then swirl around a funnel-shaped bowl before splashing into a plunge pool -- the 45,000-square-foot aquatic play land is a precursor to an even larger park under construction near the Mall of America in Bloomington.

At a cost of \$100 million, Water Park of America will eclipse the Wisconsin Dells' Kalahari Resort as the nation's largest when it opens about a year from now with the highest indoor slides in the country (10 stories) and a water roller coaster.

"The only one who will beat [Grand Rios] is the one we are building ourselves," said Angela Greer, director of marketing and public relations for Wirth Companies, a Minneapolis firm building both area water parks. "We'll give them the initial bang, then we'll give them a huge bang with the Mall of America [park]." When the Bloomington park is done, Greer said, Grand Rios will be expanded.

Jeff Wirth, a developer who specializes in rehabilitating and remodeling large older properties such as hotels, warehouses and office complexes, is leading the projects. His résumé includes the refurbishing of the Central Medical Building in St. Paul and the Grand Hotel in downtown Minneapolis. Wirth spent \$35 million transforming the former Sheraton Inn and Best Western Hotel at 6900 Lakeland Av. N. into the Grand Rios, a full-service 225-room inn with a restaurant, an arcade and the water park.

"This once was a premier facility, and we thought it was very viable to bring it back," said Wirth, 45, a Brooklyn Center native and 1977 graduate of Park Center High School. "When we acquired this site two-and-a-half years ago, we decided to do something over the top."

That meant diving into the booming indoor-water-park industry.

The arrival in the Twin Cities of the two huge indoor water parks -- along with the smaller Depot Waterpark, which opened in 2001 in downtown Minneapolis, and the Tropics in Shoreview -- is part of a wave that began in the Midwest in the 1990s and is now sweeping the country.

According to a report released by **Jeff Coy, of Rochester, and Bill Haralson, of Richardson, Texas (partners in a company called Hotel Waterpark Resort Research and Consulting)**, there were only 18 hotel water-park resorts in the United States in 2000.

That number has swelled to more than 60 this year. And 32 expansions and/or new parks went into the construction or planning stages this year, the report said.

"They are the fastest-growing segment of the water-park industry," said Rick Root, president of the World Water Park Association in Overland Park, Kan. "In the past four to five years, it's just really taken off and has expanded throughout the country, even the South." Popular nationwide, there are more than 1,000 outdoor water parks in the United States, according to the association.

In most cases, the parks are attached to resorts and are open only to guests. That is the case with the Grand Rios, but there are exceptions. Groups of 10 or more will be allowed in, as will residents of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. On Tuesday, people age 50 and older can try the water park for free. "This definitely beats the community center," said Chip Taft, 43, of Brooklyn Park. He was one of 600 people who braved "The Hurricane," shot water guns on the colorful Coconut Island and drifted along the Lazy River during an employee and family play day on Monday. "It's absolutely great. No boredom here."

Indoor water parks originated in Wisconsin Dells with the Polynesian Resort Hotel and Suites in 1989. From there, they spread to Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. In recent years they have popped up in the northeastern and northwestern United States and in the Sun Belt, where water lovers can get protection from the sun, heat and humidity. And now they have arrived in Minnesota.

"This is an entertainment destination," Wirth said about Grand Rios. "People can come here for multiple days, and it's not just for kids; it's a form of entertainment for adults, too. We're marketing this as a place for an in-town vacation."

Said Root: "Long vacations have become a thing of the past. People are staying closer to home, taking regional vacations, and indoor water parks are perfect because they allow people to spend time away regardless of the season or the weather. It's perfect because they don't have to drive or fly off somewhere."

He said the indoor parks also are popular because they combine one of the most popular recreational sports -- swimming -- with elements of thrill rides found at amusement parks.

"We have an infatuation that goes to water," he said. "And they take the best of the theme parks without the queue lines, so they appeal to families with children of all ages. You don't have the teens on one side of the city while mom and dad are doing something on the other."

Amenities often include twisting slides accommodating multiple riders at a time, water coasters and a play area where water lovers can shoot water cannons, get doused by hundreds of gallons of spilling water, and interactive sports areas.

Rooms at Grand Rio start at \$149 and include four water-park passes. Non-guests will pay \$19.95 to \$39.95 for a wristband. Group rates are available. For reservations or information call 1-866-472-6374 or see <http://www.grandrios.com>.