

Midwest waterparks: Bigger, better, wilder and wetter

Attractions make a big splash in the family fun business

By David Mannweiler, Indianapolis Star

May 15, 2005. --- George Washington was the Father of Our Country. Orville and Wilbur Wright were the Fathers of Aviation. This much we know.

But who founded the American water park -- Stan Anderson or George Millay?

A wet towel snap-off may be the only way to resolve that question. The World Waterpark Association backs Millay, because he created the first outdoor water park, Wet 'N Wild, in Orlando in 1977. The Wisconsin Dells Convention and Visitors Bureau endorses Anderson because he built the first indoor water park, the Water Factory, at his Polynesian Resort Hotel in the Dells in 1994.

Either way, both men ignited something that forever changed the way American families spend their leisure time. Never have so many gotten so wet in so many places in so many ways. About 1,000 water parks are open in North America, said Gina Kellogg, director of communications for the World Waterpark Association. The list is growing by 30 to 40 each year, Kellogg added.

Just this month, Paramount's Kings Island outside Cincinnati and Great Wolf Resorts Inc. announced a joint venture to build a 39-acre, \$100 million Great Wolf Lodge resort at Kings Island that will include a 75,000-square-foot indoor water park (about the size of 1 1/3 football fields). Construction is to begin this summer; the 404-suite resort should open in late 2006. Kings Island general manager Craig Ross said the indoor water park and resort will turn the theme park into a year-round destination.

The Wisconsin Dells pioneered the idea of indoor water parks a decade ago to make year-round use of facilities instead of shutting down after a 100-day summer season. Ski resorts and hotels are picking up the idea.

The Holiday Inn Select North in Indianapolis opened its 50,000-square foot Caribbean Cove Water Park last winter. It's open to hotel guests only, but Indiana has several outdoor water parks open to the public. Three of the biggest ones have added attractions for the 2005 season:

- Splashin' Safari at Santa Claus in Southern Indiana has a \$2.1 million Bahari Giant Wave Pool with computers that create eight wave patterns and 3- to 4-foot waves. Open now, go to www.holidayworld.com; (877) 463-2645.
- The Deep River Water Park in Crown Point has doubled its size, adding the world's first Double Dueling Bowl Ride, an interactive water action structure and an Adventure River

Ride. Opens May 27, www.deepriverwaterpark.com; (800) 928-7850.

• Splash Down Dunes Water Park in Porter has added the American Revolution Tube Slide complex. Opens May 28, www.splashdowndunes.com; (219) 929-1181. Indiana's other public water parks -- Indy Island Aquatic Center in Indianapolis, Kokomo Beach, Indiana Beach in Monticello, Tropicanoe Cove in Lafayette and Splash Island in Plainfield -- are not adding water attractions this year.

Other Midwestern parks

With travel experts predicting that gasoline prices will keep vacationers closer to home this summer, a trip to a Midwest water park might be what families are looking for. Here's a look at what some of the Midwest's top water parks have done to keep up with the Joneses, the Andersons and the Millays:

Six Flags Great America, Gurnee, Ill., (847) 249-2133; www.sixflags.com.

The theme park outside Chicago opens Six Flags Hurricane Harbor, a 15-acre, Caribbean-theme water park, on May 28. The park will have 25 water slides, 17 multi-story towers, two raft rides, Skull Island (the "world's largest interactive water playground"), a 500,000-gallon wave pool and two water coasters that plunge through open and enclosed flumes at up to 40 mph. The water park will be free with admission to the theme park.

Kalahari Waterpark Resort, Sandusky, Ohio. (877) 525-2427; www.kalahariresort.com

Ohio's largest indoor water park -- 80,000 square feet -- opens Friday. The African-themed attraction has a 596-room hotel and convention center. The water park features the first Zip Coaster, which accelerates raft-riders to speeds up to 20 mph in free-falls, dips and high-speed turns; FlowRider, which creates "California waves" suitable for surfing and bodyboards; family-sized rafts, and a 400-foot-long ride in which rafts spin uncontrollably.

Six Flags Kentucky Kingdom, Louisville, Ky. (800) SCREAMS; www.sixflags.com

The park off I-65 just south of downtown introduces Tornado! -- an "extreme tubing" ride. Many parks will add variations of the ride this summer. Tornado! begins 75 feet in the air. Riders on four-person, cloverleaf-shaped tubes shoot down a 132-foot tunnel into a large open-ended funnel where they are swirled by 5,000 gallons of water and dropped into a catch pool below. The first major expansion at Hurricane Bay since the park opened in 1998, Tornado! opens May 27, although the park opened May 7.

Wildwater Kingdom, Aurora, Ohio. (330) 562-8303; www.geaugalake.com.

The former Sea World property opened May 7, but Liquid Lightning, the park's version of Tornado!, will open in mid-June. This park's tunnel is 253 feet long. Also new is Riptide Run, a 1,100-foot-long river with wave generators and interactive spray gadgets and teen activity and children's pools. The park's seven-slide Thunder Falls (Ohio's tallest waterslide complex) has been moved.

The Beach, Mason, Ohio. (800) 886-SWIM; www.thebeachwaterpark.com.

A new hydraulic system for Kahuna Beach Wave Pool creates bigger, more consistent

waves that crest and crash like real ocean waves. This season's waves will surge up to 5 feet from crest to trough.

Avalanche Bay, Boyne Falls, Mich. (800) GOBOYNE, www.avalanchebay.com.

The new park at Boyne Mountain Resort opens May 27 with 88,000 square feet under one roof -- Michigan's largest indoor water park and an example of how ski resorts are turning to indoor water parks to become year-round attractions. Avalanche Bay will have a winter theme with ice forts; mountain slides and Splasherhorn, a play structure that dumps an 800-gallon water avalanche every 10 minutes.

Another attraction, the South Wall, challenges harnessed climbers to ascend a climbing wall in various amounts of "rain." The resort also offers four options for lodging, including the new Mountain Grand Lodge and Spa, with a grand opening the same day the water park opens. Of course, the resort has combination packages.

According to **Jeff Coy, president of JLC Hospitality Consultants in Rochester, Minn.**, we haven't seen the crest of the water park wave.

"Water parks are not played out," he said. "They are not a fad. The growth trends, consumer acceptance and impact on room occupancy and revenues are too strong to ignore."

Coy added, "The plain old vanilla hotel swimming pool is a thing of the past. Everybody who has an outdoor pool is looking to put a cover over it to make it an indoor pool, or raising the roof over an indoor pool to put in a water slide tower." In 2000, there were 18 hotel water parks in the U.S. Today there are 79. Eighteen were added in 2004; 13 will be added this year. Ninety-eight more hotels have plans for indoor parks.

"We did a study that showed hotels with indoor water parks captured a \$69-a-night higher average room rate than hotels without indoor water parks," he said. "Hotels with indoor water parks will fill rooms almost 100 percent every weekend and every school break."

Coy's database shows "maybe" waterpark projects in South Bend, Michigan City and the Portage area. "French Lick has called us," he said. "That's a perfect place for a water park, with the casino going there."

At Holiday World & Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, park president Will Koch added a 17-acre water park 13 years ago. "I often say it was the single best business decision I ever made," he said.

Top 10 U.S. water parks:

- Schlitterbahn, New Braunfels, Texas.
- Blizzard Beach at Walt Disney World, Lake Buena Vista, Fla.
- Raging Waters, San Dimas, Calif.
- Water Country USA, Williamsburg, Va.
- Splish Splash, Riverhead, Long Island, N.Y.

- Knott's Soak City, Palm Springs, Calif.
- Water World, Federal Heights, Colo.
- Six Flags White Water, Marietta, Ga.
- Wet 'N Wild, Las Vegas, Nev.
- Noah's Ark, Wisconsin Dells, Wis.

According to the Travel Channel.

Watered-down numbers:

- **First U.S. wave pool:** Point Mallard Park, Decatur, Ala., 1970.
- **Longest indoor leisure river ride in the U.S.:** Zambezi River, Kalahari Resort, Wisconsin Dells, Wis., at 920 feet.
- **Largest wave pool in the U.S.:** Typhoon Lagoon, Orlando, Fla., at 115 feet wide by about 395 feet long.
- **Largest wave pool in the world:** Dino Beach Water Park, Shanghai, China, at 181 feet wide by 360 feet long.
- **Number of water parks:** In North America, about 1,000; outside North America, 600.
- **Largest indoor water park in North America:** World Waterpark, West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, with 5 acres.
- **Largest indoor water park in the world:** Ocean Dome, Miyazaki City, Japan, with 322,752 square feet (7.4 acres).
- **Fastest-growing water park regions of the world:** Eastern Europe and the Far East/Pacific Rim.

Compiled by the World Waterpark Association.

Contact: david.mannweiler@indystar.com