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'Wow' factor: The Dells' Kalahari adds to resort by opening \$20 million indoor amusement center Friday

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LAKE DELTON -- A trip to this temperature-controlled oasis involves more than just water slides and wave pools. The number of indoor activities without water will grow this winter as resort operators in the Wisconsin Dells area continue to push the year-round entertainment envelope.

And at the Kalahari Resort & Convention Center, the \$20 million indoor amusement facility scheduled to open Friday is designed to not only cater to families, but draw more convention business. The 110,000-square-foot theme park features a six-story Ferris wheel, a 28-foot-wide carousel, an elevated go-cart track and miniature golf.



Also included are 24 lanes of bowling, golf simulators, climbing walls, laser tag and a 24-foot-high ropes course. The activities designed for team building experiences for the Sunday night to Thursday crowd.

"We really feel we're going to be able to keep this hopping all the time," said Todd Nelson, Kalahari's president and owner. "This is for everybody. Our groups are looking for something different. People are looking for new experiences."

The Kalahari is the latest destination to jump into the indoor amusement park business.

In the last two years, the additions have included bowling lanes, sports bars, roller coasters, bumper cars, multi-level play areas, simulators and scores of video games that spit out thousands of redemption tickets a day.

Weekday business is increasingly adding to the bottom line of resorts. Group business accounts for 40 percent to 45 percent of Nelson's revenue at the Kalahari. However, the nearby Great Wolf Lodge, which has limited meeting space, closed six days in November and four days this month because of a lack of midweek business.

Jeff Coy, a hotel waterpark industry expert near Phoenix, Ariz., said the indoor amenities for resorts can be used to fill more rooms and Nelson's project fits that mold.

"Todd's motto is bigger is better,' and so far, he is right," Coy said. "In this business, I have discovered that if you are going to err on the side of building it too small or building it too large, bigger is definitely better in terms of achieving the wow factor' and high occupancies and top-line revenues."

The Kalahari, at Highway 12 and Interstate 90-94, boasts a 125,000-square-foot indoor waterpark, 742 rooms, a spa and salon and 100,000 square feet of convention space. The resort is connected to Damon's Grill, which is owned by Nelson, and the 15-screen Desert Cinema. The indoor amusement center is positioned between the two via indoor walkways.

Coy, who in March will host a seminar in Wisconsin Dells for waterpark industry officials, said trends for resorts include more adventure sports, bigger waterparks and long weekends replacing the traditional one- or two-week vacation.

That means many guests will not balk at \$150 to \$250 a night rooms, \$20 passes for an indoor amusement park or \$4.50 for a game of bowling, Coy said.

The Wilderness is offering a \$22 daily pass that lets guests play some games at Wilderness and take in the rides at Knuckleheads.

At the Kalahari, renting a room includes a waterpark pass but passes for the indoor amusement park are an extra \$20 per person per day. Non-hotel guests can purchase a pass for \$30 a day. The park also offers single ride tickets.

"Twenty bucks per day is not too much to spend for the indoor recreation entertainment amusement center if it offers a full day of entertainment value," Coy said. "Consider that a person spends \$7 or \$8 for a movie theater ticket and spends another \$10 for a large popcorn and large drink for a two-hour experience and the \$20 for all day seems like a deal."

Josef Haas, Kalahari's chief operating officer and former president of the Keystone ski resort in Colorado, said similar centers are being considered for the Kalahari in Sandusky, Ohio, and for the \$200 million Kalahari that is planned for Fredericksburg, Va. "We will separate ourselves from the competition," Haas said of the amusement centers' impact. "The product experience has to exceed the price tag to make it a value."

The Kalahari amusement center will include additional seating for Damon's Grill and have a second-story bar adjacent to the bowling center, which overlooks the rides, games and other activities. To limit noise from the amusement center, concrete instead of wood was used for the go-cart track surface.

This winter, the Wilderness Resort is adding a stingray touch tank and aquariums filled with sea life, including sharks.

"Our entrepreneurs are doing what they do best," said Melanie Platt-Gibson, marketing director for the Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau. "We're convenient, value-driven and we offer all of the amenities."

Tourism generates more than \$1 billion a year in revenue for the Wisconsin Dells area, a place that used to be primarily a summer destination. Over the last 13 years, indoor waterparks have helped turn the area into a year-round vacation spot and one of the top winter destinations in the Midwest.

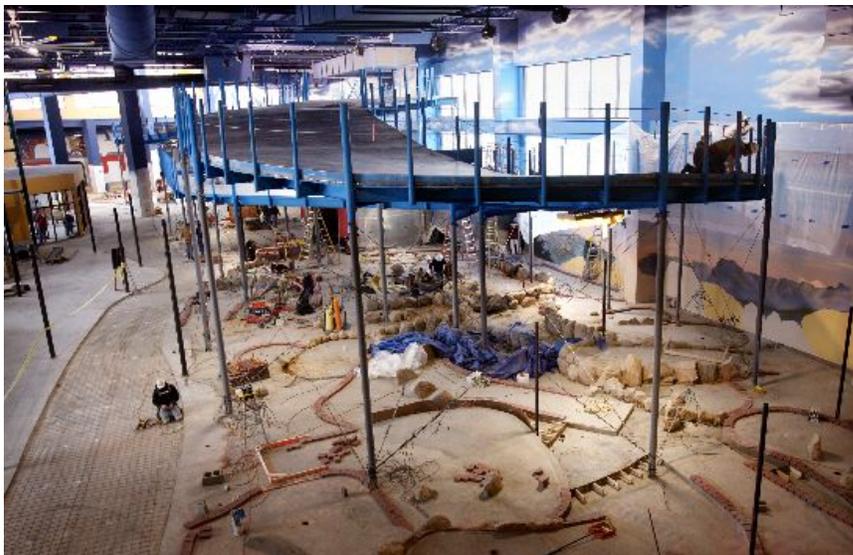
Kelly Bauer, a senior vice president at the Bank of Wisconsin Dells, which provided financing for the Kalahari project, recently toured the facility. He came away impressed with what Nelson and his team constructed.

"They do a lot of research," Bauer said. "They just don't jump into stuff. They make sure that they've covered all of their bases and they do it the right way."



The \$20 million indoor amusement park that opens Friday at Kalahari Resort & Convention Center in Lake Delton features a carousel with an African theme. The 110,000-square-foot indoor facility also includes a ropes course, laser tag and a 24-lane bowling center. Officials hope the new attractions will draw more group business to the 742-room resort. John Maniaci, State Journal.

One of the centerpieces of the indoor amusement park is a six-story Ferris wheel. The glass wall allows the ride to be seen by passing motorists on Interstate 90-94. John Maniaci, State Journal.



There was much to do on Dec. 3 when this photo of the elevated go-cart track and the miniature golf course below was taken. Officials say the \$20 million indoor park will be ready to open Friday. John Maniaci, State Journal.

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