

Water Parks Becoming Latest “Must Have” Amenity for Resorts to Lure & Wow Vacationers

Dawn Bryant | The Sun News (Myrtle Beach, S.C.) | April 21, 2014 4:19pm

April 19--There was no question among the leaders at Lakewood Camping Resort that when it came time to add some amenities to the campground, a water park would be first on the list.

Families love water parks -- different parts appeal to different ages -- and it would be well worth the investment, said Shannon Gomer, chairwoman of the board of directors and a member of the family that built Lakewood.

The \$2 million water park, which opened in the fall a few months later than expected, is the cornerstone of an overhaul of the 55-year-old campground aiming to take it to a new level.

"We knew that would be a part of it," Gomer said. "That makes a difference with the families."

Water parks are becoming the latest must-have amenity for a growing number of campgrounds and resorts aiming to lure vacationers to their properties.

Forget the simple pool and lazy river. These water parks have massive, curving, colored slides and popular interactive water features such as drop buckets and squirt guns.

It's a growing trend across the country as resorts aim to continually "wow" guests, said Jeff Coy, president of JLC Hospitality Consulting, which has produced reports on hotel water park resorts.

"Today's resort guest is looking for a unique experience, not just the same old thing," he said. "A growing number of resort owners 'get it' and are leading the way. Resort owners with water parks are locked into an arms race.

"It is definitely an escalation of who has got the biggest waterslide and the bragging rights that go with it. Bigger is better and more thrilling is the name of the game."

At Lakewood, guests will find three water slides, a 525-foot lazy river, a kids splash area, a picnic area and the usual pool. Officials say the more elaborate water features are big with all ages and especially popular with families, thousands of whom flock to the Grand Strand each year.

"With the water park, we go from children's features to lazy river, toddlers to retirees," Gomer said. "It covers the full spectrum of our customers."

Some resorts have added more water features through the years, and now several more are joining in the growing trend nationwide, saying guests have asked for it.

"Guest feedback played a role in it, for sure," said Vickie Carmody, spokeswoman for PirateLand Family Camping Resort, which is adding a 5,000-square-foot wading pool with a pirate ship, water falls and water-shooting cannons. "Trying to keep up with the top-of-the-line resort amenities."

A \$2 million water park is one of the key features being added this year at Crown Reef Resort in Myrtle Beach, which is overhauling the property after being sold in August. Crews have been working on the towering structure on the oceanfront aiming to get it open by summer.

"It's something that is exciting and gets attention," said Matt Klugman, spokesman for Vacation Myrtle Beach, a group of hotels that includes the Crown Reef. "This is a true water park."

At Lakewood, buzz about the park started when it was finished in the fall, though it hasn't gotten much action in the offseason. Crews just finished the landscaping and installing pavers in the new snack area near the water park.

But Gomer said the water park already is paying off -- reservations for the year are up compared to the bookings at this time last year, which she credits with the new marketing slogan playing off the park, "Camping with a Splash," as well as pent-up demand from the rough winter.

In addition to the water park, Lakewood added a reading room and exercise room, and has an esthetician set up to pamper guests.

"We are trying to find something that pampers everybody a little bit without having to go off the property," Gomer said.

Vacationers across the country are increasingly wanting amenities on-site at the resort -- not just nearby, Coy said.

"Resort owners in Myrtle Beach have unlocked some of the secrets of creating a resort destination. Proximity matters," he said. "You have to bring the demand on site. ... To attract the leisure segment, don't depend on the family entertainment center down the street, build one inside your hotel."

The new water parks popping up at resorts hasn't hurt standalone water parks such as Wild Water & Wheels in Surfside Beach -- in fact owner Mark Lazarus says it could end up helping his business.

"They are limited and I believe in leaving the customer wanting more -- which is where we come in," said Lazarus, who also is Horry County Council chairman. "We offer an all-day experience with bigger, taller and more than they have the footprint to offer."

Lazarus still partners with many of the properties, he said. Even though the resort water parks are getting fancier, they still don't have the room to offer the wave pools and other elaborate features as the bigger, standalone parks, Gomer said.

"We are a nice blend," Gomer said.

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