

Where the Waterslide Meets the Boardroom

Minnesota's premier water park destinations are redefining corporate travel.

By Michele Kamenar

Mention the words “water park” and most people conjure images of twisting waterslides, lazy rivers and man-made beaches – all designed to facilitate escape from the daily grind. You wouldn't automatically associate “work” with a water park, and you most certainly wouldn't associate a business trip with an excuse to tube slide – or, would you?

While most of us wouldn't make the connection, some visionary new water park hotels in Minnesota are, and in unconventional ways. Adventure-themed hotels have become the motivational strategy of choice for many corporate meeting planners. These hotels have tapped into a rising trend of combining corporate travel with family down time, capitalizing not only on their exclusivity in the market, but also on catering to the rising trend of combining work and play.

According to a recent survey by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) – 62 percent of U.S. business travelers add a leisure component to at least one business trip per year. Two-thirds of them bring family members or friends along. Water park hotels have climbed to the fore in the competitive business travel market by balancing the needs and preferences of corporate clientele with those of families getting away for a mini-vacation - and have done so with great success.

A Grand Addition

Drive nine miles northwest of downtown Minneapolis and you'll find a Mecca for the corporate leisure traveler with family in tow – Grand Rios Indoor Water Park Hotel. Situated in Brooklyn Park, Minn., the Grand Rios currently holds the title of Minnesota's largest indoor water park. A fledgling in the market, the one-year-old Grand Rios provides accommodations that offer a spectacular venue for conferences, meetings and team-building programs of all kinds. Boasting 11,000 square feet of flexible meeting space including six spacious breakout rooms and a 350-person capacity private level ballroom,

the Grand Rios has adroitly navigated the corporate destination market with ease, offering solutions for both meeting planners and leisure travelers alike.

The layout is impressive: 224 deluxe guest rooms and suites, two signature restaurants and a café offering everything from five-star dining choices to ice cream and Starbucks coffee; a fitness center, a 3800-square-foot interactive family arcade, all married to 45,000 square feet of aquatic fun.

The water park itself is an engineering marvel. Inside, find a four-story water tower featuring body and tube slides, The Big Splash - a 500-gallon dumping bucket, The Coconut Island Play area, a 35-foot lazy river, two private spas, sport pool and the Hurricane Plunge, a 40 mph flume ride that requires both an iron will and the ability to endure the occasional wedgie.

Developed and owned by Wirth Companies, the Grand Rios is proof that business and leisure can co-exist peacefully. “The idea was to create a harmony between our entertainment venue (the water park) and the hotel itself,” says Angela Greer, director of marketing and public relations with Wirth Companies. “There’s a perception that if you come to do business at a water park, you probably will have to navigate around little children running around in bathing suits in the main lobby while making your rounds through meetings. The way we have laid out the Grand Rios property ensures that these two types of guests can not only co-exist, but do so without ever really running in to one another. I feel this is something our corporate guests truly appreciate.”

Companies who have utilized the Grand Rios are in agreement. Josh Halsey, human resource manager at Party America recently held a two-day management-training meeting at Grand Rios. “The staff, the facilities, the food - everything, was first class at the Grand Rios,” he says. “You wouldn’t think a water park could combine privacy of a staff meeting with the fun and energy of a water park all wrapped up in one, but they did it. We would recommend Grand Rios to any company of any size.”

Escape to the North Woods

Opening in mid-August 2005, The Lodge at Brainerd Lakes in Baxter, Minn., is located roughly two hours from the Twin Cities and caters to a broad range of guests beyond the obvious vacationing

crowd. A feast for the senses, the lodge is themed with nostalgic northern Minnesota décor – natural wood and stone fireplaces, indigenous art and furnishings all bring the history and character of this region to life.

“Our accommodations at The Lodge truly provide the ‘Minnesota experience’ to all who will come here – a sense of the outdoors, but with none of the inconveniences,” says Jill Carlson-Ferrie, director of sales at The Lodge, “I feel we can make the family business traveler feel like they are in a different world altogether, without sacrificing anything in terms of accessibility to the office or meeting space.”

A total of 102 guest rooms, referred to as “cabins,” are on site. A variety of accommodation options for both the leisure and corporate traveler include luxury suites; a three-room kids-themed suite; a Cinema suite with 26-inch television, Xbox and Playstation; and a huge, three-room entertainment suite with a full kitchen. For meeting options, The Lodge provides 10,000 square feet of flexible meeting space with seating for groups from 12 to 500, five breakout rooms, a private 14-seat boardroom and a lodge-style ballroom with fieldstone fireplace, hardwood dance floor and two-story vaulted ceilings. High-speed wireless Internet and on-site A/V with support complete the package.

But the true star of the property is the 30,000-square-foot Paul Bunyan Water Park. This water park is the first in Minnesota (and the second in the nation) to utilize the most advanced interactive water park technology available, allowing tube-slide riders a choice of holographic “experiences,” which can even be customized to provide corporate guests the ability to include a water wall display of any image imaginable.

The water park also features a variety of indoor and outdoor pools, lazy river, Jacuzzi tub, video arcade and a snack bar. Two restaurants on site allow for fully catered events and feature diverse menus -- from broiled walleye and wood-fired sea scallops to pot roast, hearty burgers and wood-fired pizzas.

Ride the Wave

Combining business travel and family travel isn't just for working mothers. Dads are much more hands on in the upbringing of their children these days and have the same needs of balancing the demands of family and work during business trips.

Children will have an easier task of understanding just what mom or dad do for a living by occasionally tagging along on a business trip. Once they discover just how hard you work while on the road, they may be more understanding the next time you need to travel for work; and in a slow recovering economy, it's a great way to maximize family togetherness, save money and hit the waterslides with your kids between meetings.

Michele Kamenar is a freelance writer from Eagan, Minn.

[Sidebar]

Behold the Future

Keep an Eye Out for "America's Biggest Indoor Water Park."

Slated for a mid-spring 2006 grand opening, the Grand Hotel Bloomington will eclipse it's sister property, Grand Rios Indoor Water Park Hotel in both size and scope, stealing the title of "America's Biggest Indoor Water Park" once completed.

Think a four-star urban corporate hotel can't mean family friendly? Think again. Combined with the elegance and glamour of the Grand Hotel Bloomington, the Water Park of America will be the first four-star water park hotel of it kind – a marriage of sophistication and cutting edge water park technology featuring:

- Eight stories and 403 rooms
- Oversized guest accommodations standard in all rooms

- Family suites
- Two-room suites
- A 70,000-square-foot indoor water park
- A signature, upscale restaurant–Split Rock Grille
- Coffee shop
- Spa including tanning and nail services
- Business services
- Fitness center
- 5,000-square-foot event room
- Multiple meeting rooms
- Kayak course
- Geysers and water cannons
- 3,500-square-foot interactive play structure
- Zero entry depth children’s pool
- Rock climbing wall
- 5,010-square-foot arcade/redemption center

The Water Park of America will not only be America’s biggest indoor water park, but will also feature America’s highest indoor slides. The multi-level indoor water park will feature state-of-the-art play including a wave rider stand-up surf simulator and America’s longest indoor family raft ride.

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Sources:

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agreer@wirthcompanies.com / 763-561-1555 Phone / www.grandrios.com /

www.waterparkofamerica.com

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Travel Industry Association of America: Website URL:

<http://www.tia.org/Press/pressrec.asp?Item=359>

Testimonial on Grand Rios: Josh Halsey - Human Resources Manager – Party America /

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