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## 6 ways to enhance guest experience at resorts

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Savvy resort developers are eliciting the "wow" factor from guests by transforming the once-standalone resort concept into an adventure park.

### Highlights

- It's not enough to be near a major attraction; it must now be on the hotel site itself.
- Developers are circumnavigating seasonality by offering outdoor activities indoors.
- Costs for each new attract can range from expensive to affordable.



Jeff Coy

**By Jeff Coy**  
HNN columnist

Successful resort development has evolved over the decades through a series of strategies that added "wow" to the guest experience. And now we are seeing another major trend in resort development: the emergence of adventure parks and resorts.

Innovators, sporting enthusiasts and entrepreneurs are creating the new world of adventure, including zip lines, canopy tours, rock climbing, rope courses, indoor snow skiing, outdoor snow skiing during summer, waterskiing without a boat, indoor mountain biking, indoor skydiving and skating on artificial ice.

New adventure facilities are opening around the globe as single-purpose storefronts and as part of larger, mixed-use resort developments. Not all these ventures will succeed as standalone facilities, but the probability of success increases dramatically when the developer examines a few concepts.

Following are a few secrets to adding some "wow" to your hotel or resort.

### 1. Proximity matters

Years ago, hotel developers were satisfied to build a hotel near a major attraction, such as a theme park, shopping center, casino or golf course—but not anymore. Proximity matters.

Often, it's not good enough to be near an attraction. The attraction must be on the hotel site and under hotel management to increase revenues. A hotel with a golf course two miles away does not make a golf resort.

However, if you build a hotel with a conference center and a golf course on site, you are building a stronger magnet to attract business meetings and corporate golf outings. To attract the leisure segment, don't depend on the family entertainment center down the street; build one inside your hotel.

### 2. Clustering builds a stronger magnet

The waterpark concept was created from the combination of two previously unrelated elements, the wave pool and the waterslide.

The first wave pool in the United States was Big Surf, which opened in 1969 as a standalone in Tempe, Arizona. In the early 1970s, the waterslide was found as a free-standing attraction in tourist destinations such as Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

At first, both were popular as standalones, but soon they were considered one-dimensional experiences that had a narrow appeal and short length of

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stay. But when the wave pool and the waterslide were combined into a single facility, called the waterpark, that all changed. Outdoor waterparks flourished.

Increasingly, hotels are being integrated into mixed-use developments that include restaurants, nightclubs, retail shopping, movie theaters, fitness centers, health spas, recreation, sports and indoor entertainment centers. Developers are no longer content with building hotels near these demand generators; they are integrating them into the overall design of new hotel projects. The result is that more and more hotels are looking like resorts. Clustering lodging, recreation and entertainment components are the building blocks of creating a four-season leisure resort destination.

In the mid-1990s, the outdoor waterpark moved indoors, under cover and attached to hotels. Again, the concept of clustering worked. The standalone outdoor waterpark and the standalone hotel were combined into a single complex known as the hotel indoor waterpark resort.

3. Eliminate the weather factor

Indoor waterparks eliminated the weather factor. No longer could poor weather wipe out the profits for the whole year. And when you cluster numerous hotel indoor waterparks together, you begin to create a leisure resort destination, such as Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin—now known as the "Waterpark Capital of the World."

The indoor waterpark also eliminated the seasonality problem. The Wisconsin Dells destination went from a 90-day season to being open 365 days a year.

4. Create a product for all seasons

Smart resort developers have adopted the four-season strategy. Ski resort owners built golf courses, bike trails and ziplines for summer and conference centers for spring and fall to capture customers and revenues all year long.

Dozens of ski resorts have added zip lines over the last two years. For example, Vail Resorts broke ground in July at Breckenridge Ski Resort on its family-oriented mountain biking trails, adventure hiking zones, climbing wall, ziplines and ropes courses to attract summer visitors.

In addition, Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort in Destin, Florida, added a zip line and ropes course. And just last year, Westin Kierland, an urban golf conference resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, installed a double FlowRider (wave in a box) to attract younger locals during the hot summer season.

5. Bring outdoor activities indoors

Resorts by their very nature are seasonal. Yet, they need to capture revenues every day all year long to pay the annual operating expenses.

Resorts owners are faced with the challenge of creating a different experience for each season of the year. They have no choice but to adopt the four-season strategy to survive.

One way to do that is to bring traditional outdoor activities indoors. Any sporting activity you normally do outdoors now has an indoor version. Yes, golfing outdoors is superior to golfing indoors. But, on rainy days during a vacation, indoor golf is great!

Swimming in an outdoor pool on a hot, sunny day is ideal. But during inclement weather while on vacation, an indoor waterpark saves the day. Resorts with indoor recreation facilities face fewer trip cancellations and preserve their revenue streams. Future resort designs will incorporate more





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6. Add adventure

Adventure travelers are everywhere. Hotels are looking more like resorts, and resorts are looking more like theme parks. Consider the following adventure activities and facilities to add “wow” to your resort:

- skating on artificial ice;
- rollerblading at an indoor skate park;
- snow skiing indoors on real snow;
- snow skiing outdoors in summer on artificial surface slopes;
- water skiing without a boat, using a cable system;
- surfing indoors, using a wave machine;
- flow boarding using a FlowRider sheet wave in a box;
- kayaking or rafting at an indoor whitewater river park;
- rock climbing at an indoor climbing wall;
- indoor trampoline park;
- mountain biking at an indoor mountain bike park;
- rope walking at an indoor ropes challenge course;
- zip lining at an outdoor canopy tour or indoor center;
- indoor skydiving using a vertical wind tunnel;
- golfing outdoors, using a Frisbee disc; and
- golfing indoors, using a golf simulator.

Costs will vary from expensive to affordable. For example, a 50,000-square-foot indoor waterpark might cost \$20 million to build; a 50,000-square-foot family entertainment center might cost \$10 million. But an elevated go-kart track will only cost about \$650,000. A ropes course might cost \$300,000, and a laser tag course could be \$110,000. However, a golf simulator might cost only \$60,000. During the recent recession, resort owners found less expensive ways to add high entertainment value to the guest experience.

Resort owners with excess land might want to attract these adventure developers by offering the acres needed along with a joint venture arrangement. It’s an easier, low-cost way to bring more adventure on site and add “wow” to your resort.

Of course, you might need the help of an expert to choose the right adventure add-on. And you will want to compare initial costs versus the boost in resort revenues.

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