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Lagoon Boom

Inside the
multi-billion-dollar
"Blue Economy"





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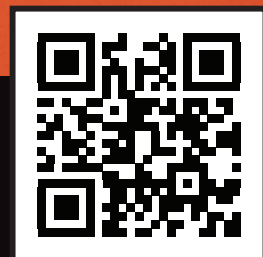
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Build It ... and They Will Surf

The plowed plot in the circle below may look barren now, but come 2026, a new surf park will welcome adventure seekers. The Point Surf Park and partner Endless Surf broke ground on a 10.5-acre site near the Sebastian Inlet on Florida's east coast. The Point will use Endless Surf's ES36 technology, known for its pneumatic hardware that can generate waves lasting up to 19 seconds.. For more on the inland "lagoon boom," the current trend of building giant, resort-style pools, turn to p. 40.



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Launch



AQUATIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP

*the
Water Park
issue*

The large tipping bucket at the top of Okana's indoor water park unleashes a flood of water into the play area.

WATER PARK RESORTS

Oklahoma's Okana Oasis Opens

Chickasaw Nation's landmark leisure investment generates excitement and economic growth

by Juliana Gilling

ON A CHILLY FEBRUARY MORNING IN OKLAHOMA, the Chickasaw Nation celebrated a warm achievement: opening the Okana Resort & Indoor Waterpark in Oklahoma City. The expansive \$400 million destination combines a 100,000-square-foot indoor water park—one of the largest in the region—with a 4.5-acre outdoor adventure lagoon. The resort also features an 11-story, 404-room hotel, a 20,000-square-foot family entertainment center, a spa, multiple food and beverage facilities, a 1,500-seat outdoor amphitheater, and conference center space.

Okana's themed water park and other attractions are designed to appeal to everyone, not just thrill-seekers. Managing Director Ken Leone describes the facility as "an elevated and modern resort experience." Brian Szydosky, water park general manager at Okana, says, "We are bringing a world-class indoor water park experience to the region—something that hasn't been done at this scale before in Oklahoma."

This momentous project represents a bold vision for the futures of Oklahoma City and the Chickasaw Nation. The resort sits on the downtown riverfront next to the First Americans Museum, which is also operated by the Chickasaw Nation.





Juliana Gilling, Funworld's contributing editor, began covering the global attractions industry in 1994. She reports on innovative people, projects, and additions for Funworld and the IAAPA News Hub. Juliana lives in the U.K., where she is a vibrant freelance writer. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



"It took hard work, dedication, and cooperation from many people to get here," says Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby. "Together, we've transformed this site from an old oil field into a world-class entertainment and cultural destination that supports the First Americans Museum and showcases the traditions of Oklahoma tribes."

Okana reflects a commitment to creating opportunities and memories.

"We are creating unique experiences for both our guests and the local community," Leone says, pointing out that the resort's restaurants and spa are proving popular with locals.

Okana's indoor water park offers thrill slides, a 6,200-square-foot wave pool, a 420-foot lazy river, a sheet wave for flow-boarding, luxury cabanas, and an adult-only pool. Outside, the lagoon provides a large recreational area with body slides, an inflatable obstacle course, a swim-up bar, and a "fly" pool where guests can zip, jump, and slide into the water.

Jim Dunn, president of Aquatic

Development Group (ADG), praises the collaborative effort that shaped the new destination, sharing, "The partnership among the Okana team, the Chickasaw Nation, and ADG has truly resulted in something special."

ProSlide worked closely with ADG by providing a full suite of water attractions. Signature rides include Wild Rapids—a RocketBlast water coaster featuring two FlyingSaucer 20 turns and ProSlide's water coaster drop. The Splash Falls multi-level play structure with interactive water elements, tipping buckets, and slides designed for younger guests provides endless fun.

The indoor water park meets the growing demand for year-round enjoyment, no matter the weather. Innovative ride technology plays a key part in reaching this objective. "We feature next-generation slides and attractions, interactive water play, and multi-rider experiences to enhance engagement," he says.

The park also focuses on luxury and comfort, offering upscale cabanas, adult-only areas, and relaxing pools. With flexible event spaces and private rental options, the destination can host everything from school groups to corporate retreats.

At Okanarama!, the family entertainment center, guests will find interactive arcade games, arts and crafts, a mirror maze, virtual reality adventures, two-story laser tag, and an escape room.

"I'm most pleased with how we've created a balanced, all-encompassing guest experience—blending high-thrill attractions, immersive theming, and resort-style relaxation," Szydlowsky says. 

okanaresort.com

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1

DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

DOLLYWOOD MEETS KENNYWOOD

On **Herschend's** 75th anniversary in late May, the operator announced its acquisition of **Palace Entertainment's** 24 U.S. attractions. The owner of Silver Dollar City and Dollywood has added Kennywood and Dutch Wonderland to their portfolio, bringing the number of attractions under Herschend's umbrella to 49.

"They're very important in the communities they serve, which is important to us," **Andrew Wexler**, CEO of Herschend told IAAPA News in an exclusive interview. One of Wexler's main priorities post-merger? Take care of the company's 22,000 hosts (the name bestowed upon Herschend employees.) "For them, this is little nerve racking, obviously. At the end of the day, the hosts touch our guests, and it's the hosts that really make the guest experience," he shares. With the acquisition complete, Herschend expects to serve nearly 20 million guests annually.



Kennywood's Pittsburgh Plunge.

MICHAEL COSTELLO



See Funworld's complete interview with Wexler on IAAPA's YouTube channel.

2

NEW AND NOTABLE

▶ SÃO PAULO SURFING

Brazil is now home to a 28,000-square-meter surf lagoon surrounded by a sandy beach.

Beyond the Club, São Paulo uses a bathymetry design and the 62-module **Wavegarden Cove** wave generator to produce rides lasting up to 30 seconds and waves two meters tall. "It just doesn't get better than this," says Gabriel Medina, a three-time world surfing champion, Olympic medalist, and Beyond The Club business partner.



WALLACE VASCO

▶ ON A PEDESTAL

In honor of **Bobbejaanland** founder **Bobbejaan Schoepen's** 100th birthday, the amusement park in Kasterlee, Belgium, debuted a caricatured statue and renamed a plaza after the entertainer. Schoepen, who passed in 2010, was a songwriter, entrepreneur, comedian, and professional whistler—along with the founder of the attraction bearing his name. The park unveiled the statue on the date of his wedding anniversary in May.



BOBBEJAANLAND

▶ MAKING A SPLASH

Chimelong Water Park in Guangzhou, China, made a splash with its largest and most ambitious expansion. Two new signature attractions from **ProSlide Technology** include a launching HydroMagnetic LIM Mammoth Coaster that's combined with a FlyingSaucer element and a family tower complex with a double tornado element. ProSlide says the project's mantra included "building smarter" ensuring the tower was engineered for operational excellence and future growth.



PROSLIDE

3

GUEST RELATIONS

INSTANT **FEEDBACK**

The overhead announcement, “Welcome back riders! How was your ride?” takes new meaning at **SeaWorld Orlando**. Select ride locations now feature a sign at the exit prompting guests to provide feedback using their smartphone. Signs like this one at **B&M’s** Mako hyper coaster sport a QR code, that when scanned, link to a website encouraging guests to provide comments. Everything from employee recognition to opening a lost and found inquiry can be done electronically—and immediately—without the need to walk back to guest relations at the front gate.



SCOTT FAIS

4

REVENUE GENERATION

OFFICE **PARTY**

Ripley Entertainment’s new headquarters in Orlando not only holds the company’s treasured archive collection (everything from Abraham Lincoln’s hair to Star Wars vehicles made from matchsticks)—but was designed to host corporate events. Within five minutes, modular office desks can be wheeled away and catering tables rolled in for a one-of-a-kind reception.

“It’s not a fixed museum with everything behind glass or a rope,” explains John Corcoran, director of exhibits at Ripley Entertainment of the artifacts in the gathering space. “It’s a chance to see it like no one else has.”



SCOTT FAIS

5

BRANDING

SWEET N’ **TWISTED**

Swinging high above Spring Creek in The Hollow section of **Hersheypark** awaits the latest Screamin’ Swing model from **S&S Worldwide**. Named **Twizzlers Twisted Gravity**, the park boasts the new-for-2025 addition as the tallest ride of its kind at 137 feet. To celebrate the ride themed to Twizzler’s candy, Hersheypark extended the brand to new F&B offerings, creating the new Twisted Strawberry King Sized milkshake, the Twisted French Fry Flight (serving french fries with Twizzlers strips, soft serve, and a sweet dipping sauce), and a Twizzlers-inspired burger. Plus, the park built the new Twizzlers Terrace that serves as a photo op location with Twizz, a park mascot embodying the candy.



HERSHEYPARK



HERSHEYPARK



HERSHEYPARK


HAVE A DISPATCH FROM THE FIELD?

Have a Dispatch from the field for Funworld? Share your 2025 successes, wins, and innovations with IAAPA News. Send news, photos, and wins to FunworldWorks@IAAPA.org



ALTERFACE

Alterface Debuts FEC-Friendly Action League

A compact edition of Alterface's Action League Popcorn Revenge attraction has opened inside Candy World at Suzhou Amusement Land Forest World—about an hour and a half west of Shanghai.

Installed on the first floor of the three-story indoor family entertainment center, the 200-square-meter attraction offers tournament-style gameplay with team-based interaction and vehicles with multi-axis motion. This version of the attraction is designed just for family entertainment centers.

Vehicles rotate among scenes, and guest teams are

reshuffled after each round, creating a varied experience that supports a throughput of up to 360 guests per hour.

Popcorn Revenge features Alterface's animated popcorn characters, previously deployed in installations across Europe and Japan. This is the first Popcorn Revenge attraction in China. The Candy World version includes localized theming and a semi-open layout for increased visibility within the venue.

The project is a collaboration between Alterface and Jiangsu Boren Culture Technology.

alterface.com/action-league-popcorn-revenge/

Spinning Thrills Await on Legoland Korea's New Coaster

Legoland Korea debuted Masters of Spinjitzu, the world's first Ninjago-themed roller coaster. Manufactured by Mack Rides, this custom spinning coaster features a traditional chain lift hill, a dynamic track layout, and cars that rotate up to 360 degrees—delivering a high-energy experience without inversions.

"We've invested significantly—₩20 billion—to create an attraction that will truly resonate with our guests," says Legoland Korea Resort Divisional Director Lee Soon-Gyu. "This is just the beginning. We are committed to the ongoing investment and development of the remaining 30% of Legoland's available land."

Set within the newly expanded Ninjago zone in the Chuncheon, South Korea park, Masters of Spinjitzu invites guests to train alongside ninja characters and embark on an interactive mission to save the world. The 1,135-foot coaster reaches 40 mph while 16-passenger trains with back-to-back seating make it accessible and exciting for all ages.

legoland.kr



LEGOLAND KOREA



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‘Paw Patrol’ to Spring into Action at Chessington World of Adventures

Chessington World of Adventures Resort will count on puppy power as the park southwest of London prepares to open the United Kingdom’s first themed land inspired by “Paw Patrol,” Nickelodeon’s hit children’s TV show later this year.

Expanding its family entertainment offerings, Merlin Entertainments has partnered with Paramount to bring the globally popular brand, produced by Spin Master Entertainment, to Chessington. Merlin is promising

“first-of-its-kind concepts,” including four “Paw Patrol”-themed rides, guest accommodations, and a bespoke retail offering.

Merlin Entertainments CEO Fiona Eastwood sees Chessington as a natural home for the project. “The partnership with Paramount reinforces our position as the preferred partner for the world’s most beloved brands and builds on our expanding offer to families with younger children, who are a key audience for us as part of our future growth plans,” she says.

chessington.com

Norwegian Cruise Line and Conductr Give Outdoor Sports a Glow-Up

In a bold move set to redefine cruise ship entertainment, IAAPA member and technology studio Conductr has collaborated with Norwegian Cruise Line to create Glow Court, one of the world’s first outdoor interactive LED sports courts found at sea. Launching aboard the Norwegian Aqua, the installation transforms the ship’s top deck into a multifunctional digital arena, fusing sports, gaming, and immersive media.

“It’s not just a sports court; it’s a fully interactive space that transforms in seconds, switching among games, fitness



challenges, and real-time content with the tap of a button,” explains Peter Cliff, CEO and co-founder of Conductr.

“Powered by our LED surface technology and motion tracking, Glow Court brings real gameplay to life without the need for wearables. Players can dive into fast-paced games like Volcano, our take on basketball’s HORSE, and Wall Ball [a high-energy football drill] or group fitness challenges that blend physical movement with quick thinking,” adds Cliff. Up to 15 people can play the games at once.

conductr.com



Sustainability is Child's Play for KidZania Kuwait

KidZania Kuwait, a playful interactive city made for children, is positioning itself as a sustainability leader—embedding energy efficiency, recycling, water-saving measures, and community projects into its operations. The Alshaya Awards for Excellence named the attraction Sustainability Brand of the Year.

“At KidZania Kuwait, we believe that building a better world starts with teaching the next generation to care for it. Our focus on sustainability is a big part of our mission to create real-world learning experiences for kids,” says Steven Putzeys, leisure and entertainment business manager at Alshaya Group. “Winning the Sustainability Brand of the Year award gives us even more

energy to bring eco-friendly practices into everything we do at the park and how we welcome our guests.”

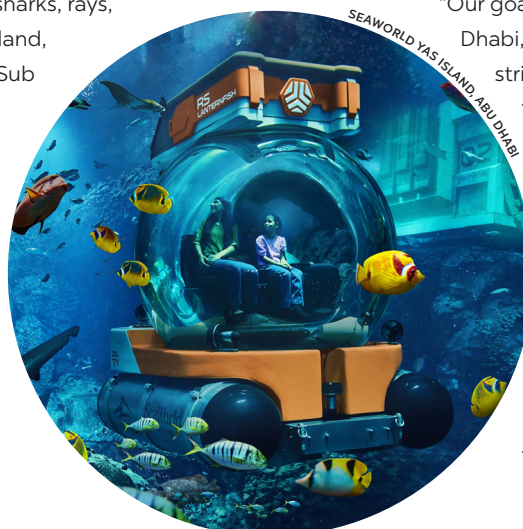
By installing energy-saving LED lighting and smart HVAC systems, KidZania Kuwait has cut utility costs by more than 17%. Automatic taps conserve water, and digital processes have replaced paper. KidZania Kuwait has also hosted community events and organized beach cleanups and sustainability workshops. The destination creatively reuses materials for arts and crafts programs and supports the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

kuwait.kidzania.com

SeaWorld Yas Island Debuts Submersible for Underwater Tours

Visitors can take a deep dive among sharks, rays, and schooling fish as SeaWorld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, debuts an innovative SeaSub experience. Four guests at a time can join the submersible’s pilots for a 30-minute underwater tour of the colorful marine life right inside the region’s largest multi-species aquarium.

Supplied by Doer Marine, the vehicle is the world’s first classed submersible designed, built, and certified for an aquarium setting. The submersible can reach depths exceeding 20 meters.



“Our goal is to make SeaWorld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, a unique and exciting destination. We strive to balance the elements of education, conservation, and entertainment all in one place and offer our guests one-of-a-kind experiences that resonate with them for a lifetime,” says Rob Yordi, general curator at SeaWorld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi. “We are delighted to add the SeaSub experience to our repertoire for our inquisitive guests and hope it leads to more unforgettable memories for families.”

seaworldabudhabi.com



FABIAN SALAME

Charles Darwin Research Station Builds New Facility in Galápagos

The Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) has launched a major renovation of its historic Tomas Fischer Complex, marking one of its most significant infrastructure investments in recent years. Originally built in the 1990s, the complex is a cornerstone of the station's terrestrial science operations. Its transformation is aimed at enhancing scientific capacity while deepening community engagement with the unique natural heritage of the Galápagos Islands.

The project will be built in two phases, starting with the construction of a new North Building, set to open by the end of 2025. This state-of-the-art facility will bring together the station's four Natural History Collections under one roof. Comprising over 137,000 specimens, these collections are unique in Ecuador and play a vital role in the study and conservation of Galápagos biodiversity.

darwinfoundation.org

Mexico's Playmohistoria Wins Top Innovation Award

At the 2025 edition of Tianguis Turístico, Mexico's leading annual tourism trade fair, Playmohistoria was awarded the Mexican Tourism Product Innovation Award in the cultural category. This prestigious honor recognizes creative and impactful tourism experiences nationwide. The award underscores Playmohistoria's success in reimagining how museums engage audiences through playful, educational storytelling.

Located in Zacatecas' UNESCO World Heritage-listed historic center, Playmohistoria is the first museum in Mexico dedicated to Playmobil. Since opening in 2016, this family-friendly



attraction has become a favorite, offering immersive, time-travel experiences through meticulously crafted dioramas. These scenes use thousands of figures and accessories to illustrate key moments in human history and natural evolution.

The museum's mix of nostalgia, education, and interactive design reflects the vision and dedication of its founder, Jorge Alberto Contreras López de Lara. With more than 7,000 Playmobil figures and 50,000 accessories across 16 themed showcases, Playmohistoria is home to the largest Playmobil collection in Mexico.

playmohistoria.com



FEVER

New Immersive Multiplayer Game Debuts at 123Boom!

A new arcade experience at 123Boom! in Melbourne asks guests to suit up and race the clock—or face messy consequences. Groups of four to eight people step into life-size games, where they earn points by navigating a mix of puzzles, laser mazes, ball games, and full-body challenges designed to test skill, speed, and teamwork. In the final showdown, named K-Boom, players put on clean suits and face shields while attempting to disarm a paint-filled canister before the clock runs out. Should they fail, a colorful cloud of paint will cover players head to toe (hence the need for the

safety gear). Each 75-minute session includes six challenges, each set in a different room.

Developed by Spain's FUN&TIK! and brought to life with live entertainment platform Fever, 123Boom! blends the thrill of escape rooms, theatrical performances, and games.

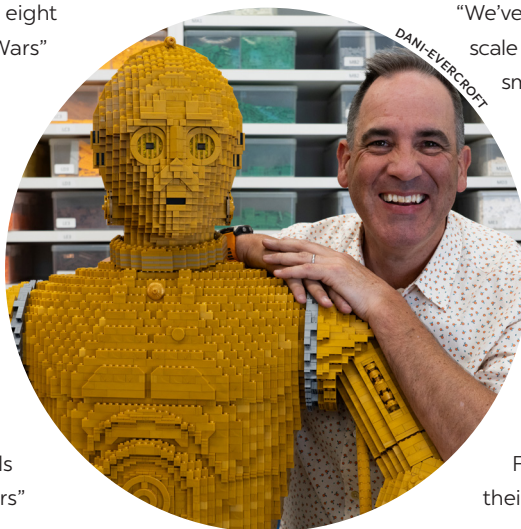
"123Boom! is more than just an arcade game; it's a fully immersive experience that brings out the competitive spirit in everyone," says Fever ANZ Regional Manager Phil Mallet. "We're excited to offer Melbourne a new way to bond, play, and make unforgettable memories."

melbourne.123boom.games

Brick by Brick: Building a 'Star Wars' Spectacle at the Melbourne Museum

At the Melbourne Museum, more than eight million Lego bricks illustrate the "Star Wars" universe as an immersive, hands-on experience.

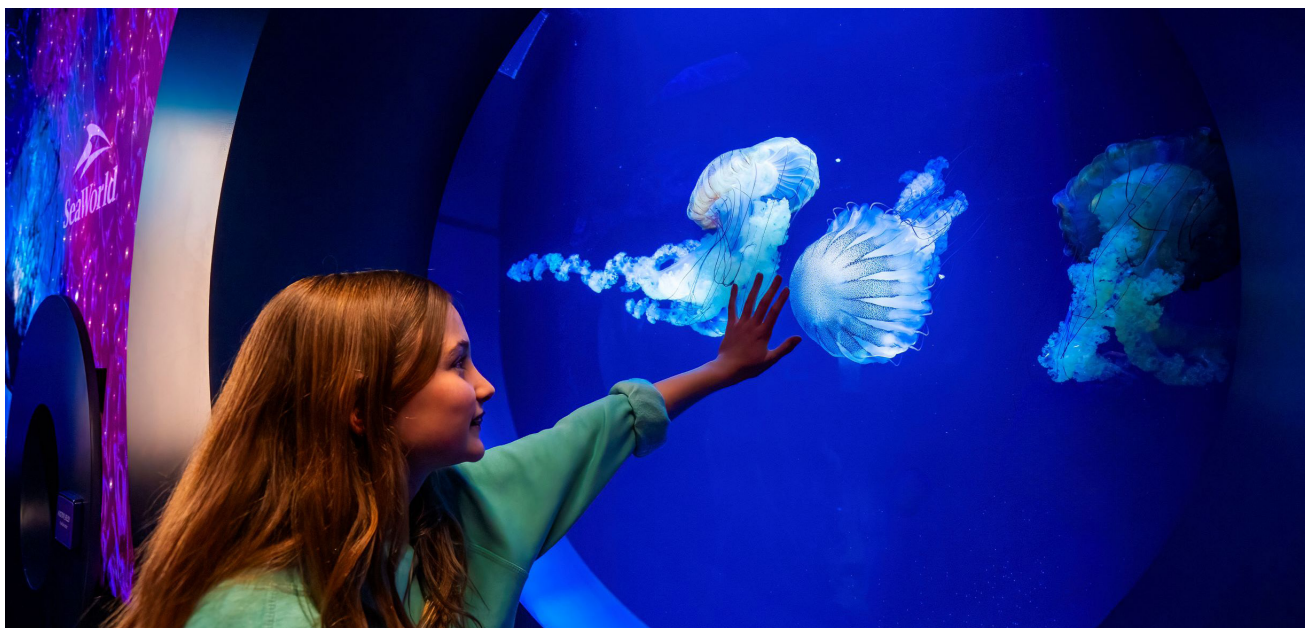
Lego Star Wars: The Exhibition features one of the largest collections of life-sized Lego Star Wars models ever created. A team led by Ryan "Brickman" McNaught—a leading Lego brick artist and the judge on Australia's award-winning TV show, "Lego Masters Australia"—spent 25,000 hours meticulously building breathtaking, full-scale models spanning classic and modern "Star Wars" moments.



"We've pushed ourselves to build models on a scale never seen before—visitors will see the smallest details of the most iconic 'Star Wars' moments, built brick-by-brick," says McNaught. Each model is crafted with remarkable detail, representing iconic characters, droids, and starships from across the saga.

Visitors are also invited to help build massive Lego Star Wars landscapes, create custom lightsabers, and see their designs come alive in a digital setting as they choose their Force allegiance and face off against their friends.

museumsvictoria.com.au/



SEA WORLD SAN DIEGO

New Jellyfish Exhibit Floats into SeaWorld San Diego

SeaWorld San Diego has opened its new exhibit, *Jewels of the Sea: The Jellyfish Experience*. The new attraction provides an opportunity for guests to encounter the mysterious world of jellyfish.

The exhibit includes three galleries that allow guests to closely view several species of jellyfish. The attraction also features a 10-foot-tall, walk-through archway tank filled with moon jellyfish and a fully immersive LED room.

"The response has been fantastic, with visitors not only awe-struck by the beauty and intrigue of jellyfish but also gaining a deeper appreciation for their critical role in our ocean ecosystems," says Tyler Carter, park president of SeaWorld San Diego. "This exhibit is a powerful combination of education, conservation, and unforgettable experiences, and we're excited to continue inspiring action for ocean preservation."

seaworld.com/san-diego

Los Angeles Zoo Provides a New Home for Their Cape Vultures

This summer, guests at the Los Angeles Zoo can enjoy a new exhibit that returns Cape vultures to public viewing. Guests can again see how the animals live and interact in the African wild.

"These remarkable birds have unique, gregarious personalities," says Rose Legato, curator of birds for the Los Angeles Zoo. "I hope that everyone will be inspired by these magnificent vultures—sparking curiosity, fostering appreciation, and ultimately becoming advocates for conservation—not just for wildlife around the world, but for the biodiversity in their own backyards."

Legato adds that the new exhibit ensures an up-close view in a setting that resembles the nesting cliffs and rock walls of the vultures' native range.

lazoo.org



LOS ANGELES ZOO



THE BONAIRE REPORTER

Bonaire Beach Park Boosts Accessibility with New Ramp

Isidel Beach Park, located on the island of Bonaire (east of Aruba in the Atlantic Ocean), has taken a major step toward inclusion with the installation of a new accessibility ramp. Officially inaugurated during a visit by members of Fundashon Kuido pa Personanan Desabilitá (Foundation for the Care of People with Disabilities), the ramp provides safe and easy access to the sea for people who have trouble with mobility.

"This new feature is a meaningful improvement for accessibility on Bonaire," said Edilse Goeloe, Director of Fundashon Kuido pa Personanan Desabilitá. "It allows everyone to enjoy

the sea and beach, regardless of physical limitations."

The park on Bonaire, an island municipality of the Netherlands, also includes outdoor fitness equipment adapted for wheelchair users.

Located in the capital city of Kralendijk, on Bonaire's West Coast, Isidel Beach Park features the remains of an old pier that is now a celebrated snorkeling and diving spot. The park, opened in May 2024, quickly became a treasured community space committed to accessibility.

[instagram.com/isidelbeachpark](https://www.instagram.com/isidelbeachpark)

Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden Reopens as Home to African Art in Morocco

The Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) reopened earlier this year in Marrakesh, Morocco. Backed by a substantial investment from Fondation Alliances, the relaunch marks a turning point in MACAAL's evolution as a leading platform for African art and cultural dialogue.

The museum's new core exhibition, titled *Seven Contours, One Collection*, features more than 150 rotating works from the 2,000-piece collection. Themed galleries explore urgent topics like decolonization, globalization, and ecology.

New additions to the museum include site-specific installations, a Timeline Room that traces artistic and political milestones across the continent, and a media library focused on digital and performance art. Redesigned public areas now feature a cafe, green spaces, and outdoor sculptures.

macaal.org



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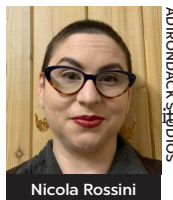


vantage.co



New Portfolio Director at Adirondack Studios

Nicola Rossini is Adirondack Studios' new portfolio director, a newly created role that reflects a strategic shift in the company's project delivery model as they celebrate 50 years in business. Rossini brings experience across themed entertainment, global events, and cultural institutions. She worked on interactive development at the 2010 Winter Olympics, as well as on special effects and integration for Na'vi River Journey and Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser at Walt Disney World. "What excites me most [about Nicola joining our team] is our shared vision for providing concierge-level dedication and care, worthy of our top-tier clients," says Jeff Moulton, Adirondack Studios' vice president of product delivery.



ADIRONDACK STUDIOS

Newly Appointed CFO and EVP at Christie

Christie has made two additions to its leadership team. **Hideaki Takizawa** is the company's new chief financial officer, and **Sean James** takes on the role of executive vice president of global sales and service. With more than 28 years at Christie, James started as a field engineer and helped lead the company's transition to digital cinema. In his new position, James oversees worldwide sales and service operations. Takizawa brings more than 34 years of experience from parent company Ushio, where he most recently served as general manager of the business management division. Takizawa succeeds Michael Phipps, who continues as president and chief operating officer.



CHRISTIE



CHRISTIE

Stern Pinball Brings on New Studio Art Director

Jeremy Packer, known to his colleagues as "Zombie Yeti," is **Stern Pinball**'s new studio art director. Packer is an award-winning illustrator who gained recognition in the pinball industry for his dynamic, comic-inspired art style. His portfolio includes hit pinball games, such as Godzilla, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the newly announced King Kong: Myth of Terror Island. In his new position, Packer oversees the creative studio while continuing to develop artwork for future games.



STERN PINBALL, INC.

"His innovative approach to creating cohesive, story-driven artwork has helped modernize pinball's aesthetics, and he has reintroduced hand-drawn techniques to a market often reliant on photo-based art or digital collage," says Chief Creative Officer George Gomez.

Universal Hires COO and EVP

Universal Destinations & Experiences has promoted two industry

veterans to senior roles. **JL Bonnier** is the new president and chief operating officer of Pacific Rim Universal Destinations & Experiences, where he will oversee the teams and operations of Universal Studios Japan, Universal Beijing Resort, and Universal Studios Hollywood.

Bonnier, who has led Universal Studios Japan for nearly 10 years after playing a key role in its acquisition by Comcast, succeeds **Tom Mehrmann**, who is retiring. **Taku Murayama** succeeds Bonnier as Universal Studios Japan's executive vice president and general manager. A long-time Universal executive, Murayama played a pivotal role in the park's post-pandemic recovery and the success of its "NO LIMIT!" campaign. The transition comes ahead of Universal Studios Japan's 25th anniversary next year.



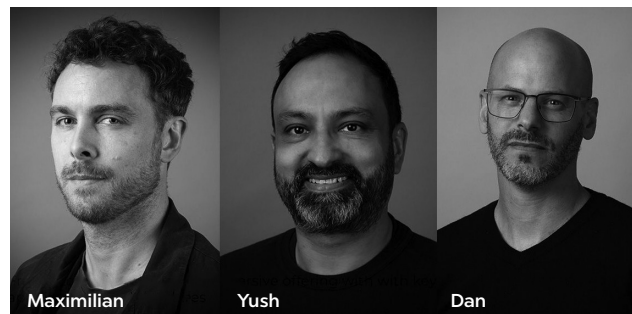
UNIVERSAL DESTINATIONS & EXPERIENCES



UNIVERSAL DESTINATIONS & EXPERIENCES

Framestore Adds New Leadership to Immersive Division

With major experiences underway across theme parks, museums, and new-to-market venues, **Framestore** has expanded its Immersive team. **Yush K.** and **Dan Lavi** join as executive producers, while **Maximilian Guy McNair MacEwan** will lead strategic partnerships. "Dan, Yush and Max all bring exceptional leadership, expertise, and a passion for innovation that will elevate our immersive offering to new heights," says Heather Kinal, senior vice president of Immersive. The company expects their combined strengths will ensure Framestore remains at the forefront of immersive storytelling.



FRAMESTORE

In Memoriam

Frank Minnella

Frank Minnella, co-founder and CEO of **Lock America**, passed away on March 26, 2025. Minnella led Lock America in developing security solutions used across multiple industries, including vending and self-storage. The company exhibited at IAAPA Expos for 35 consecutive years and maintained IAAPA membership for 42 years. IAAPA recognizes and appreciates Minnella's long-standing contributions to the attractions industry, and he will be remembered fondly as a dedicated community member.



MSM

Top Spin Reaches New Peak at Alton Towers

Rising 78 feet above the ground, the **Toxicator** at Alton Towers Resort in the United Kingdom is touted by the park to be the highest Top Spin ride of its kind. **Huss Park Attractions** collaborated with Merlin Magic Making and Alton Towers Resort to create the unique experience. Guests on the ride are flipped and suspended over a pool of “toxic alien acid,” surrounded by erupting fountains and dramatic lighting. The ride’s back-to-back 38-seat design delivers a floorless thrill, enhanced by new restraints and panoramic views. A custom soundtrack, synchronized effects, and an 8-meter-high water feature complete the experience, which vibrantly illuminates during Alton Towers’ popular After Dark events.

hussrides.com



Hikvision AI Platform Enhances Crowd Tracking

Hikvision’s newly launched **Guanlan** platform is a large-scale AI model designed to improve how connected devices interpret and act on visual data in real time. For attractions, this could mean better crowd tracking, fewer false alarms, and quicker responses to operational issues. Hikvision enables clients to tap into this technology through devices like the 4MP DeepinViewX Fixed Lens Bullet Camera, which uses the AI platform to enhance detection accuracy, minimize redundant alerts, and cut false alarms by more than 90%. Guanlan’s large multimodal models also enable users to search for specific objects in video footage using natural language queries.

hikvision.com/europe/core-technologies



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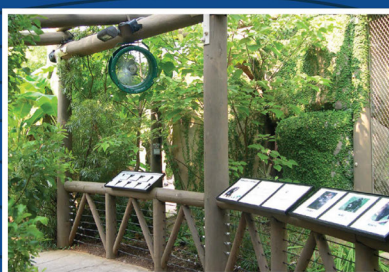
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Industry Insights



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Peter Lehman Sounds Off About Attractions

At a young age, Peter Lehman discovered that he had an innate aptitude and love for music. A fan of rock band Kiss, it was a revelation at the age of 8 when he figured out that he could play and sing the group's hit song, "Beth." Lehman subsequently formed bands, began writing his own songs, and pursued his passion with zeal.

His talents paid off. He was accepted by the Berklee College of Music in Boston, but he instead decided to head to central Florida in 1990 to attend Full Sail Center for the Recording Arts, now known as Full Sail University. As Lehman was learning the craft of music production and sound design in the theme park hotbed, he visited Walt Disney World and Universal Studios Florida and was struck by the shows and attractions.

"It had never occurred to me that somebody needs to be creating the music and sound at parks," Lehman says. "I thought this could be a cool way to try and make a living and get in on the advent of digital sound technology."

He tucked that notion away and journeyed to California to pursue music and sound work in the film industry. With some B-movie credits under his belt, Lehman caught the interest of Hollywood's largest independent sound company and was hired to work on films at its then-new Orlando location. Among the many movies he worked on were "Face Off," "Pocahontas," "Jerry Maguire," and "Braveheart," for which he won an Oscar.

However, landing back in Florida gave Lehman the opportunity to lend his expertise for attractions. At Universal, he was the composer and lead sound designer for Terminator 2: 3-D and also developed the sound for The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man. Lehman founded his own company, Visible Sound, in 2001 and



PETER LEHMAN



ABOVE: Lehman on location at Earthquake – The Big One, part of Universal Studio Hollywood's Studio Tour.


LEFT: Lehman working on a scene from Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon at Universal Studios Florida.

worked on Universal's Revenge of the Mummy attraction as one of his creative shop's first projects.

"At the beginning of that ride when you hear, 'Get out of here! The curse, it's real. He's after your soul,' that's my voice," Lehman shares.

With his oldest son and fellow musician, Alex, by his side, Visible Sound has developed a reputation for amping up parks and attractions around the world, including Motiongate Dubai and Genting SkyWorlds in Malaysia. The two recently worked on the latest Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Epic Universe in Orlando, with Alex developing the music and sound throughout the new world and Peter focusing on the Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry attraction. At the Sphere in Las Vegas, Lehman served as a creative and technical consultant for the massive theater's groundbreaking sound system.

He is currently working on a project featuring, of all things, Kiss, which will showcase the now-retired band in a dynamic, digital form. For a kid who dressed up as Peter Criss, it's a dream come true.

"Just yesterday, I was sorting through the tracks for the song, 'Beth,'" Lehman says, marveling at the opportunity. "It is a really cool, full-circle thing." 



A lifelong park fanatic, **Arthur Levine** first started writing newspaper and magazine features about the industry he loves in 1992. He produces his own Substack newsletter, "Arthur's About Theme Parks" at **AboutThemeParks.fun**



Enhanced Aquatic Monitoring Using Video and Artificial Intelligence

A look at newly implemented technologies at Roaring Springs

ATTRACTIONS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING to advanced technologies to ensure monitoring in areas that were never imagined before. One such innovation is the Aquatic Vigilance System (EAVS) by Ellis International, a surveillance solution that integrates artificial intelligence (AI) and video analytics. Together, they support drowning prevention and incident management at water parks and at other attractions.

EAVS uses a network of high-resolution H5 analytic cameras—including thermal imaging—to monitor pools, decks, and adjacent spaces with full 360-degree coverage, both day and night. At Roaring Springs Waterpark in Meridian, Idaho—the first outdoor waterpark in the United States to implement EAVS—57 cameras deliver more than 100 unique visual perspectives. Two dedicated control rooms operate continuously during park hours. Both are staffed with trained operators who rotate every 20 minutes to ensure attentiveness and reduce fatigue. These operators can alert lifeguard supervisors in the field via radios and mobile devices.

The addition of EAVS has not replaced lifeguards. Rather, it adds a second layer of monitoring designed to complement human observation with real-time data and incident detection. Tiffany Watts, chief marketing officer of Roaring Springs, explains this dual-coverage system enhances communication and helps create a safer, less stressful working environment for frontline staff.

EAVS has also led to adjustments in Roaring Springs' staff training practices. Previously reliant on content from other facilities, the park now trains staff using




ROARING SPRINGS

archived situational footage specific to their own venue. “Being able to have content that is specific to the areas/zones/facility your employees will be working in is much more valuable,” says Watts.

Benjamin Strong, COO of Ellis International, explains the EAVS technology can be tailored for more than just water parks. “The system’s scalable design allows for effective implementation in family entertainment centers (FECs), queue lines, midways, other high-traffic areas, and even security.”

Roaring Springs extended EAVS’ capabilities throughout the park to include game rooms and walkways. AI-powered behavior analysis now supports proactive intervention and risk assessment across the property. “The camera coverage has helped us see other incidents that happen in the park and might not be in the water,” shares Watts, who cites examples such as slips and falls while entering and exiting pools, theft, horseplay, and altercations between guests.

Installation of EAVS generally takes 30 to 45 days, depending on facility needs. The implementation process includes site assessment, IT and hardware integration, and customized staff training. The system adaptable for broader use cases, including occupancy tracking, geolocation, contact tracing, and chemical monitoring. It is designed to be scalable and suitable for both new construction and retrofit scenarios. “The system’s advanced AI-driven analytics have not only enhanced real-time monitoring but have also provided invaluable data, leading to a deeper understanding of human behaviors and risk factors in aquatic environments,” says Strong. An example of the data’s insights demonstrates how variables like wave action or water depth can influence guest responses. These insights can inform future safety protocols and help shape a more proactive safety culture in aquatic environments. 

A look inside the control room at Roaring Springs Waterpark in Meridian, Idaho, where EAVS technology is at work.



Michael Costello is the managing editor of Funworld at IAAPA. With 20 years working in the attractions industry, he has also volunteered in his free time with the National Amusement Park Historical Association. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).





Denise Beckson: Shaping Teams, Advocacy, and Leadership at Morey's Piers

DENISE BECKSON'S START in the attractions industry began at a young age. "I kicked off my career at Morey's Piers at just 14, working a seasonal job in admissions," she says.

From there, she worked her way up through lifeguard, supervisor, and trainer roles. After earning her master's degree, she moved into full-time management and eventually became director of water parks, overseeing Morey's two beachfront locations in New Jersey.

She describes herself as a fixer—someone who steps in, identifies opportunities, and adds value wherever needed. This mindset led her through a range of departments, from water parks to human resources, food and beverage, and ultimately, to her current position as vice president, chief administrative and external affairs officer, where she oversees HR, compliance, legal matters, and public affairs.

"I encourage others to look beyond what's directly in front of them," Beckson says. "Opportunities can be adjacent, behind, or off to the side—you just have to be open to seeing them."

Advocacy Through Storytelling and Relationship-Building

One of Beckson's key skillsets involves her work in public affairs and advocacy. For her, effective engagement with policymakers is all about building trust and staying proactive. "The goal is to become a trusted resource—someone legislators recognize and can turn to for insights, not just during times of crisis but consistently over time," she explains.

Beckson emphasizes that advocacy isn't only about data and policy briefs; it's about telling stories that bring the numbers to life: "I've found success in sharing real-world examples from the park—how a piece of legislation affects the lifeguard on their first job, or how a regulation impacts



PROVIDED BY DENISE BECKSON

the flow of international workers through the BridgeUSA Summer Work Travel program."

Leadership That Listens and Empowers

At the heart of Beckson's leadership approach is a simple but powerful principle. "Leadership is all about creating a culture of trust, growth, and open communication—and it starts with one simple thing: listening. Really listening." Beckson believes in actively seeking out conversations, stepping away from the desk, and engaging deeply with team members.

She prioritizes aligning team strengths with company goals, celebrating wins, and creating an environment where people feel ownership over their work. "Supporting people both professionally and as individuals builds stronger relationships, fosters growth, and keeps motivation high," she adds.

The Art of Seasonal Staffing

Running a seasonal amusement park brings unique staffing challenges, and Beckson tackles them strategically while keeping the best interests of team members in mind. "Seasonal staffing isn't just a scramble to fill shifts—it's a strategic, people-first operation powered by connection, creativity, and a lot of heart."

Since Morey's Piers employs many teenagers who are often working their first job, Beckson recognizes the significance of providing a positive start to a new stage of life. "We're not just teaching them how to clock in or to use the cash register—we're helping shape their confidence, work ethic, and early view of professional life," Beckson shares with pride.

Successful seasonal operations require early forecasting, robust recruiting pipelines, and meaningful onboarding. Beyond hiring, Beckson focuses on creating a culture that's fun, inclusive, and supportive, ensuring seasonal employees feel they belong from day one. **FW**

Denise Beckson and IAAPA members meet with Senator Thune (second from left), the current senate majority leader.



Avery Matteo is the associate editor of Funworld at IAAPA. She is an Orlando-based writer and editor with more than five years of experience supporting educational institutions, nonprofits, and associations. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).





Making Sustainable Strides

IAAPA celebrates and elevates importance of sustainability

AS MORE ATTRACTIONS EMBRACE sustainability and others look to begin their journey, IAAPA stands ready to support operators and manufacturers of all sizes. With EDUSessions at IAAPA Expos, webinars, whitepapers, a newly created global director of sustainability position, and an inaugural IAAPA Brass Ring Award honoring facilities making a positive impact, the global association for the attractions industry is serious about sustainability.

At IAAPA Honors 2025 in Rust, Germany, the organization recognized PortAventura World in Tarragona, Spain, with an inaugural Brass Ring Award for Best Sustainability Program.

“Receiving this recognition is a tremendous honor and a reflection of the commitment, passion, and teamwork that define PortAventura World,” says the resort’s Chief Sustainability Officer Choni Fernandez. “Sustainability is part of our DNA and at the core of our purpose.”

PortAventura World wrote in its award application: “At PortAventura World, we believe in experiences that generate change. We have done this for over 25 years and, day after day, we challenge ourselves to improve the wellbeing of people, our community, and the planet we live on,” wrote the park.

PortAventura World’s award winning program is based on the principles of the UN Global Compact and Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the World Tourism Organization’s Global Code of Ethics for Tourism.


“We are confident that the jury recognized PortAventura World’s strategic vision of sustainability, which is present throughout all areas of the resort,” Fernandez tells Funworld. Those areas include environmental, social, and governance (ESG).

Fernandez offers these five suggestions to attractions ready to begin their sustainability journey:

1. Start with a clear purpose
2. Obtain commitment from top leadership
3. Engage employees to participate
4. Ask visitors to play a positive role
5. Start small, measure results, and then scale up with key learnings

“PortAventura World set the gold standard this year, demonstrating that sustainability isn’t a side program, but a core business strategy. Their bold commitment to carbon neutrality, community impact, and regenerative practices made them an undeniable choice,” says Chair of the Best Sustainability Award Task Force and Executive Vice President of SSA Ventures, David Rosenberg.

“This new IAAPA Brass Ring Award shows that sustainability is a strategic priority for IAAPA,” says Ylva Linder, IAAPA’s global director of sustainability. “It’s also a way to encourage our members, highlight great efforts, and celebrate the fantastic sustainability work happening across our industry.”

Linder joined IAAPA in December 2024, bringing 25 years of experience in strategic and operational sustainability work. With an Executive MBA and a degree in chemical engineering, she hit the ground running, quickly laying the foundation for IAAPA’s sustainability journey with strategy and guidelines. Based in Sweden, Linder joined IAAPA from Liseberg. She’s developing digital sustainability training for IAAPA staff and the association’s members. The education modules will be practical, accessible, and designed to build knowledge. Ahead, Linder plans to create opportunities for shared learning and greater connections through a new professional network, whitepapers, and educational sessions. 



JORDI MUNTAL

Surrounded by IAAPA regional vice presidents and executive directors at IAAPA Honors, PortAventura World Chief Sustainability Officer Choni Fernandez (speaking) and Vanessa Rodriguez (holding Brass Ring Award), PortAventura World Sustainability Manager, inspire attendees to begin their own sustainable journey.



Connect with IAAPA’s Global Director of Sustainability **Ylva Linder**. Find her on [LinkedIn](#).





Train Less, Lead More

How AI agents can solve internal business bottlenecks

As digital operations evolve, many businesses and organizations are exploring new ways to streamline workflows and improve communication. One tool gaining traction across industries is the AI-powered chat agent. From supporting internal training to enhancing employee interactions, these systems can achieve specific operational goals. Let's break down how companies have begun to apply AI chat agents in strategic ways.

Empowering Employees with On-Demand Support

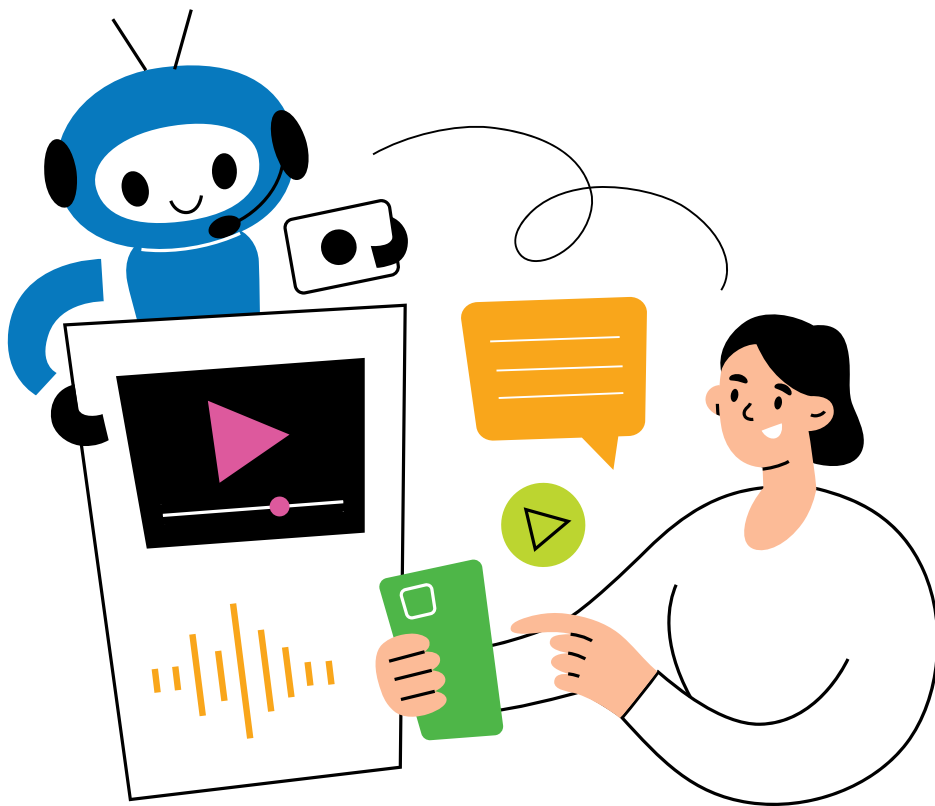
Imagine seasonal employees trying to understand your attraction's PTO policy, benefits enrollment steps, or how to clock in. Instead of walking to the HR office, an internal AI chat agent can provide instant, accurate answers.

AI agents serve as a self-service hub for commonly asked questions, onboarding steps, and workflow guidance. This doesn't just reduce response lag—it increases employee confidence and speeds up adaptation. When information is at their fingertips, new employees can quickly become productive, engaged, and independent.

Freeing Up Managers to Focus on Leadership

Too often, people managers spend significant time answering repetitive questions that could easily be documented and automated. With an internal AI agent in place, team leaders can reclaim that time and refocus on what really matters: Efficiently operating an attraction.

These AI chatbots can even be trained to escalate only when necessary—filtering the signal from the noise. Instead of spending 15 minutes explaining how to submit a time-off request, a water park manager can rely on the AI to handle it, while they spend that time



in meaningful 1:1s with seasonal employees or engage in rescue and response training.

Identifying Training Gaps and Optimizing Resources

One of the most underrated benefits of an AI chat agent is its ability to quietly collect data in the background. By analyzing the types of questions employees are asking, companies gain valuable insight into where there may be knowledge gaps, outdated documentation, or unclear processes.

For example, if dozens of employees ask how to fill out tax withholding forms every month, that's an opportunity for technology to step in. AI doesn't just answer questions—it helps identify and improve patterns.

AI chat agents aren't here to replace people—they're here to unlock human potential. When deployed with intention, they enhance employee experiences, streamline operations, and give leaders the space they need to lead. **FW**



Dan Flores is head of tourism at Satisfi Labs, an artificial intelligence partner of IAAPA. This column is printed in partnership with Satisfi Labs to empower attractions to discover new techniques to grow their business. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).



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Insights Await Attractions Professionals at IAAPA Expo Europe 2025



SOON IT WILL BE TIME TO SAY “¡HOLA BARCELONA!” as IAAPA Expo Europe 2025 prepares to welcome attractions professionals back to the vibrant Spanish city. Education programming will take place Sept. 22-26, and the show floor will be open Sept. 23-25 for attendees.

IAAPA Expo Europe is an unmissable opportunity to gain valuable connections, insights, and solutions that could make all the difference to success as the attractions industry navigates market changes and evolving challenges.

Boosting Business in Barcelona

The 2025 event is already breaking records; this year's show floor will be the largest in IAAPA Expo Europe's history. More than 690 exhibitors will occupy nearly 21,000 square meters of space at the Fira Barcelona Gran Via.

Around 32 million people visit Barcelona annually, keen to sample the Catalan capital's attractions, from spectacular landmarks, such as the Antoni Gaudí-designed Sagrada Família cathedral, to contemporary themed destinations, like PortAventura World.

“Barcelona is a culturally rich city with a very diverse leisure offering, from historical highlights to the newest innovations. You can see everything from smaller indoor offerings to full amusement parks and everything in between,” says Peter van der Schans, executive director and vice president of IAAPA Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA). “‘Find Forward’ is our Expo's theme this year, and you will find your direction here. I can't wait to see our members in Barcelona.”

Networking Pays Dividends

IAAPA Expo Europe is renowned for its networking opportunities. It is a place to make friends, discover new ideas and business prospects, share actionable data, and learn from some of the brightest minds in our industry. Attendees can connect with hundreds of exhibitors showcasing the latest products and services, all under one roof.

A highlight is the Opening Reception, which will be hosted at Tibidabo Amusement Park on Sept. 23. More than 1,000 attendees will gather at the park, which overlooks Barcelona.

Smaller networking receptions will focus on professionals creating attractions in the Middle East, water parks, family entertainment centers, indoor entertainment facilities, amusement and theme parks, science centers and museums, and zoos, aquariums, and nature-based attractions. Food and beverage, design, and creative professionals will also have their own receptions.

Continuing Professional Development

The attractions industry's growth is rooted in learning, and IAAPA Expo Europe is largest and most comprehensive attractions industry education conference in the EMEA region.

More than 100 world-class speakers and more than 60 educational options are featured in this year's program. During a week of knowledge sharing, collaboration,



and inspiration, speakers will discuss how to adapt, manage, and stay relevant in today's rapidly changing world.

Tom Van Liefferinge, IAAPA EMEA's senior education manager, explains the goal of the 2025 education program is to equip industry professionals with the skills necessary to "stay on track with new ideas, new methods, and fresh perspectives in these highly dynamic times and evolving industry."

Keynote speakers, leadership panels, and special events will cover a range of topics tailored to the industry's needs "built by the industry, for the industry." The Innovation Stage will again provide a platform for new and upcoming voices and perspectives.

Day-long programming devoted to specific disciplines, including sustainability and water parks, will return. Due to high demand, this year's Indoor Entertainment Day is only for IAAPA members.

EDUTours will go behind the scenes at Spanish attractions, including PortAventura World, allowing attendees to meet management teams. New this year is a cruise line-themed EDUTour, covering subjects like pricing strategies and greater revenue generation.

IAAPA Expo Europe acts as a professional growth and development hub for individuals and businesses. Aspiring leaders can deepen their knowledge through the IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals' intensive two-day learning program. IAAPA Expo Europe also supports the next generation by providing events for young professionals and students. Attendees can support future leaders by donating to the IAAPA Foundation scholarship fund.

Elevating Women at IAAPA Expo Europe

IAAPA continues to champion women, and IAAPA Expo Europe is introducing a dedicated lunch for women in the industry in 2025. This brand-new event brings together attractions professionals committed to advancing women in the business. IAAPA EMEA encourages everyone to unite, hear from inspirational leaders,




expand the support network for women within IAAPA, and drive positive industry change.

Safety Is the Foundation

Safety remains foremost in IAAPA members' minds. IAAPA Expo Europe will host Safety Day, a full-day program focused on safety, to further promote, support, and enhance safety in the industry. The IAAPA Safety Exchange (separate registration required), a gathering of senior safety professionals, will reconvene. Professionals attending the expo with safety-related questions can speak to IAAPA EMEA Safety and Security Subcommittee members at the Safety Corner inside the IAAPA Member Lounge.

Committing to Sustainability

Sustainability continues to be a priority for IAAPA Expo Europe, with a strong focus on continuous improvement. New initiatives for 2025 include collecting data on attendee travel, enhancing waste and recycling practices, and reviewing catering to reduce single-use items. Exhibitors are encouraged to take part in an expanded sustainability program featuring on-site follow-ups and opportunities to share their sustainability journeys and best practices.

Whether attendees are seasoned professionals, building their careers, or new to the field, IAAPA Expo Europe 2025 offers something for everyone. Plus, those wishing to extend their stay will be able to take advantage of an IAAPA Post Tour around attractions in Madrid, taking place Sept. 26-27. 



Agenda details are subject to change. Visit IAAPA.org/IAAPAEurope2025 for updated information and to register.

Michael Shelton Steps into IAAPA COO and Executive Vice President Role

MICHAEL SHELTON'S PROMOTION FROM VICE PRESIDENT and executive director of IAAPA North America to chief operating officer and executive vice president of IAAPA represents not just a professional milestone, but the continuation of a lifelong connection to the attractions industry.



"I had to get a job as a young teenager because I was always getting in trouble," Shelton recalls with a smile. "My mom pointed me to a new water park being built in Colorado and told me to apply for a job. It was 10 miles away, so I hopped on my bike, headed to the water park and got my first job where I began my journey through the attractions industry as a 'trash boy.'" His duties? "Picking up trash and hosing off guests' feet after they climbed the dirt path to the park's single water slide. "That's how I started in this industry," he shares.

Over time, summer jobs turned into full-time roles, with Shelton eventually becoming managing director of multiple venues at Hyland Hills Parks and Recreation District in Colorado before joining IAAPA in Orlando—just as the association was relocating its global headquarters from Alexandria, Virginia to Orlando. Since then, he's held two different roles at IAAPA, gaining insight into both the operational and association sides of the business.

Now, as COO, Shelton is focused on strengthening the association and positioning it for continued evolution. "This new role will allow me to align operations globally and to focus on cross departmental collaboration" he says. "With a global vision and a regional focus, we will be able to connect with our members in new and exciting ways."

Shelton sees ongoing transformation as critical. "We're not a theme park, we're an association—but we touch every part of this industry. It's essential we keep evolving to meet member needs."

Reflecting on the appointment, Shelton says the recognition feels surreal. "To be seen as someone who can make a difference in an organization this impactful—it's an honor. I love to be challenged, and I'm ready to meet this new challenge head-on and give it my best so that our members and our team can benefit from the work ahead," he concludes. **FW**

IAAPA Leadership Visits Brazil to Engage Growing Market

IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl, along with Paulina Reyes, vice president and executive director of IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean, made a productive visit in May to Brazil—one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding markets in the global attractions industry.

The visit marked Wahl's first official trip to the country. The leadership team met with key stakeholders to explore local opportunities, deepen relationships, and exchange insights on the future of the industry.

As part of the trip, the IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean office hosted a Meet & Greet in São Paulo, where Wahl connected with industry professionals, operators, and entrepreneurs. Among those in attendance was Alexandre Costa, CEO of Cacau Show, who is leading the development of Cacau Park, one of the country's largest

upcoming projects, which is slated to open in 2026.

Wahl also served as a speaker at the opening of the Sindepat Summit (Integrated System of Parks and Tourist Attractions). His remarks reinforced IAAPA's role in offering a global perspective and fostering international collaboration among attractions leaders.

"This visit was an important step in strengthening ties across regions," says Wahl. "Brazil's market potential is remarkable, and we're excited to support our members within the country as they bring innovative experiences to life."

As IAAPA continues to expand its presence and programs across the Latin America, Caribbean region, the association remains focused on providing value, insight, and opportunities for growth within Brazil and across the industry's most promising markets. **FW**



IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl poses for a photograph at Sindepat Summit after serving as an opening speaker.

by Avery Matteo

IAAPA FOUNDATION | ASSOCIATION NEWS AND BENEFITS

Investing in Tomorrow's Talent

IN THE FAST-EVOLVING ATTRACTIONS LANDSCAPE, nurturing the next generation of talent is essential. The IAAPA Foundation plays a vital role in this mission by providing scholarships, experiential learning opportunities, and career-building support to students aspiring to shape the future of the industry.

For students like Jessica Rosenblatt and Zoe Miller from San Diego State University (SDSU), the IAAPA Foundation's support has proven transformative. Rosenblatt, originally focused on film production, but soon discovered a broader passion for the attractions industry after attending IAAPA Expo with support provided by the IAAPA Foundation. Inspired by panels on immersive experiences and the use of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, she added a minor in Recreation, Tourism, and Management to complement her marketing studies. "I didn't realize how big and exciting the industry is," Rosenblatt shared, noting her new interest in event planning and live entertainment.

For Miller, who graduates with a degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management, the IAAPA

Foundation provided access to industry leaders she once only admired from afar. Through Expo participation, she connected with top Disney executives and gained firsthand insight into leadership and management in the theme park world. Sessions like "How to Create Your Perfect Pitch" equipped her with practical tools she applied in an academic competition, helping her team earn second place.

Beyond individual success stories, the IAAPA Foundation ensures the long-term health of the attractions industry by building a pipeline of passionate, prepared young professionals. By reducing financial barriers, the Foundation gives students real-world exposure and industry access, helping them build networks, sharpen skills, and envision meaningful careers.

For businesses across the attractions sector, the IAAPA Foundation's work is not just about philanthropy—it's about cultivating the talent that will drive innovation, guest satisfaction, and industry resilience for years to come. **FW**



Jessica Rosenblatt



Zoe Miller

For more information on the IAAPA Foundation and to learn how professionals can support the next generation of leaders, visit [IAAPA.org/foundation](https://iaapa.org/foundation) for more information.

IAAPA Honors Winners Share Insight from Germany



From L to R: Andreas Andersen, JL Bonnier, Taku Murayama, and Lina Lee.



Kati Murphy (right), vice president with Meow Wolf accepts the Top LBE of the World award.



Valeria Cañón, director of Aerópolis.

Apply for your own IAAPA Award today. For a list of categories and deadlines, visit [IAAPA.org/about/awards](https://iaapa.org/about/awards)

A MODERN GOLD RUSH took place in Rust, Germany, in April as Europa-Park hosted IAAPA Honors 2025. Attendees benefited from networking opportunities, behind-the-scenes tours, and insight provided by winners of IAAPA Awards. Everything from the coveted IAAPA Brass Ring Award to IAAPA Service Awards were distributed with Europa-Park serving as a backdrop full of inspiration.

Beginning in this edition of Funworld, IAAPA News shares the excitement and expertise from award-winning professionals hailing from around the world.

Universal Studios Japan Earns Liseberg Applause Award

Universal Studios Japan took home the coveted Liseberg Applause Award recognizing attractions that embody creativity, innovation, and sound business practices. “Universal Studios Japan’s dedication to excellence in every aspect—from attractions and shows, to customer service and interrelation with Japanese culture and traditions—is an inspiration for the global attractions industry,” says Andreas Andersen, president and CEO of Liseberg

Group and the chairman of The Applause Award Board of Governors.

Originally a biennial honor, the prestigious award—bestowed by the esteemed Liseberg theme park in Sweden—became an annual celebration in 2024.

“To win this kind of award and bring it back to our crew members in Japan is a massive accomplishment,” says Lina Lee, senior vice president of park operations at the park.

Meow Wolf Named Top LBE of the World

Wearing a bonnet resembling a roller coaster that she crafted herself, Kati Murphy, vice president with Meow Wolf, accepted the award for Top LBE of the World. “We love our peers in this industry, and to be honored at this level is just awesome. It’s beyond next level. It really validates the work that we’re doing and tells us that we’re on the right track,” Murphy shares while walking IAAPA Honor’s red carpet. The operator of five eclectic art museums, Meow Wolf is known for weaving together modern art in immersive environments. Murphy says in order to be No. 1, everyone has to stretch.

“Every single person at Meow Wolf knows how hard we work and how much we put into it, and so to be told that they’re the best is beyond an honor.”

Meow Wolf also won an IAAPA Brass Ring Award for Best F&B Building Renovation or New Build at Radio Tave’s Cowboix Hevvven located at the Meow Wolf location in Houston.

Latin America’s Valeria Cañón Honored with IAAPA Service Award

The IAAPA Service Award recognizes dedicated volunteers who contribute their time and expertise to IAAPA, their communities, and the industry at large, often as leaders or mentors. In 2025, tireless IAAPA volunteer Valeria Cañón, director of Aerópolis, a natural attraction in Argentina, took home a well-deserved IAAPA Service Award from the Latin America, Caribbean region for being a resource to so many.

“I am feeling a lot of emotion—this is something I didn’t expect,” Cañón tells Funworld, adding some wisdom. “I think it’s very beneficial when you dedicate time to our industry. Being a volunteer is very, very rewarding.” **FW**

Host an Event at the IAAPA Headquarters



IAAPA INVITES MEMBERS of the global attractions industry to host meetings and events at IAAPA Headquarters in Orlando. Nestled on a scenic seven-acre property with a picturesque lake, IAAPA's workspace is designed to serve as a hub for industry connections and innovation.

Versatile Meeting Spaces

IAAPA Headquarters offers a variety of rentable spaces to suit gatherings of all sizes. With options ranging from intimate 150-square-foot rooms to expansive 2,010-square-foot areas, both indoor and outdoor settings are available to accommodate diverse event needs.

These spaces include:

- **Connections A:** 720 square feet, ideal for 20-40 attendees.
- **Connections B:** 750 square feet, suitable for 20-40 attendees.
- **Connections AB Combined:** 1,470 square feet, able to host up to 80 attendees.
- **Outdoor Terrace:** 1,100 square feet, accommodating up to 120 attendees.
- **Lobby:** 2,010 square feet, capable of welcoming 130 attendees.
- **Member Outpost:** 150 square feet, designed for small group meetings of up to five attendees.

Convenient Accessibility and Comprehensive Support


IAAPA Headquarters ensures easy access to transportation hubs. A Lynx Orlando city bus stop is just 350 meters from the entrance, and the Orlando International Airport and Brightline high-speed rail station is a short drive away.

Events can be scheduled from Monday through Saturday, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., providing ample flexibility. Additional event support is readily available for an additional fee, including audiovisual equipment installation and catering services from IAAPA's preferred vendor list. On-site overnight parking is also available.

Sustainable and Innovative Design

IAAPA Headquarters exemplifies sustainability in its design and construction, and it is tailored to perform efficiently in the Florida climate. The property features a 10.5 kilowatt solar farm, underlining the association's commitment to environmentally responsible practices. In addition, all rental fees go to support the IAAPA Foundation.

Exclusive Member Benefits

IAAPA members enjoy exclusive discounts when booking meeting spaces. For further details, visit IAAPA.org/IAAPAHQMeetings or contact the IAAPA Meetings & Special Events Department via email at Meetings@IAAPA.org 



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IAAPA Stands with Members Every Step of the Way by Offering Complimentary Individual Memberships

At IAAPA, our commitment to supporting global attractions industry professionals extends beyond moments of growth and success—it includes the times of transition and challenge. We recognize that recent workforce changes have impacted valued members of our community. That's why IAAPA is offering **complimentary individual memberships** to those who have recently lost access due to layoffs or organizational changes.

Through this offer, we aim to ensure our members remain connected to insights, networking, and resources that can help guide their next steps, whether it's exploring new roles, staying informed on industry trends, or remaining a part of the community they've helped shape. This is more than a membership—it's continued belonging and support when it matters most.

To request support, email IAAPA@IAAPA.org with your former company, former company email address, and date of separation. 



"At IAAPA, we believe membership means more than access—it means community. We're proud to offer this resource to ensure our members stay connected when they need it most,"

— IAAPA President and CEO
Jakob Wahl



The Power of IAAPA Membership

As the global leader in the attractions industry, IAAPA offers unbeatable membership benefits tailored to professionals, companies, and organizations.

2025 Membership Options

IAAPA caters to the varied needs of industry stakeholders and offers three membership categories:

- **Attractions Facilities:** Designed for amusement parks, water parks, entertainment centers, museums, zoos, natural attractions, resorts, and more, this membership provides comprehensive coverage for entire facilities, irrespective of size.
- **Manufacturer/Supplier/Consultant:** Tailored for companies engaged in manufacturing, supplying, or consulting within the attractions sector, this membership extends across the entire organizational spectrum.
- **Individual/Student:** Crafted for professionals operating within the attractions industry, this membership offers tailored categories catering to diverse career stages, including young professionals, retirees, educators, and students.

Member Benefits

IAAPA membership affords unparalleled advantages aimed at driving strategic growth and fostering professional development.

News and Publications

- **Funworld Magazine:** Gain access to the industry's preeminent source of information, covering trends, innovations, and best practices, delivered in print and digital formats.
- **IAAPA News Daily:** Produced by Funworld's editorial team, this daily e-newsletter delivers headlines and insights from accredited news sources across the globe.
- **IAAPA.org Access:** Seamlessly navigate industry news, event information, educational resources, and regional updates via IAAPA.org, the association's centralized online platform.

Connections

- **Expos and Events:** Experience premier networking, innovation, and knowledge-sharing opportunities at IAAPA's flagship events, where members enjoy exclusive perks and savings on registration fees, exhibit spaces, and event tickets.
- **IAAPA Regional Events:** Network with industry peers and stakeholders at discounted rates through a comprehensive calendar of regional networking events.
- **IAAPA Connect+:** Enhance your event experience with an interactive platform providing easy access to schedules, exhibitor information, wayfinding tools, and the chance to connect with fellow attendees.
- **IAAPA Connect+ Marketplace:** Access a virtual hub for year-round networking and business opportunities, connecting buyers and sellers across the globe.
- **IAAPA Job Board:** Source top talent and explore career opportunities within the global attractions industry through IAAPA's dedicated job board.

Research and Resources

- **Reports and Industry Data:** Tap into the premier source of global attractions research. Explore operational benchmark reports, regional economic impact studies, quarterly outlook reports, and an annual global theme and amusement park outlook study.
- **Crisis Communications Support:** Ensure your organization is ready for a crisis. Download IAAPA's Crisis Communications Template from the IAAPA Bookstore. In a crisis, call the 24/7 support line: +1 321-319-7602.
- **Business Solutions Partnership Program:** Provides the resources and support to create new and proven revenue streams, reduce costs, and optimize operational efficiencies.
- **Hosted Buyer Program:** Meet with a wide range of IAAPA Expo exhibitors to learn about new products and trends, network with leaders, and stay up to date with the latest industry developments.

Education


- **Certification Programs:** Elevate professional credentials with esteemed certification programs, including the IAAPA Certified Attractions Professional (ICAP) and IAAPA Certified Attractions Executive (ICAE) designations.
- **Webinars, Webcasts, and Online Learning:** Engage in monthly live webinars, archived sessions, and online learning resources covering industry-specific topics, which are available in multiple languages.

Safety Standards and Training

- **Facility Excellence Self-Assessment:** Leverage IAAPA's safety tool to measure progress and assess the health of safety procedures.
- **Safety Guidance:** Prioritize safety and compliance with IAAPA's global efforts to establish industry-leading safety standards and comprehensive training initiatives.

Public Affairs

- **Industry Advocacy:** Benefit from IAAPA's advocacy efforts aimed at shaping industry regulations and legislation to ensure a conducive business environment for attractions professionals worldwide.

IAAPA membership serves as a catalyst for professional growth and industry advancement, offering a wealth of benefits tailored to meet the diverse needs of attractions professionals worldwide. Join IAAPA today and unlock the full spectrum of advantages poised to elevate success within the global attractions industry. Visit [IAAPA.org](https://iaapa.org) to learn more and to explore the full breadth of the association's offerings. 

This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of July 1, 2025, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit [IAAPA.org/Events](https://iaapa.org/Events)

JULY 2025



Wonders of China after Expo

4-7 | Shanghai; Xi'an

Webinar: Nights, Holidays, and Weekends: A Conversation on Work/Life Balance

10 | Online

IAAPA Meetup: Toronto Zoo

15 | Toronto

IAAPA Presents: Tomorrowland

25 | Boom, Belgium

AUGUST 2025

IAAPA Meetup: Legoland California

12 | Carlsbad, California

Webinar: What You Don't Know About ASTM And Why You Should

14 | Online

IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals: Gramado

26-28 | Gramado, Brazil

IAAPA Meetup: Universal Orlando Resort

28 | Orlando

SEPTEMBER 2025

IAAPA Public Affairs Conference 2025

15-17 | Washington, D.C.



22-26 | Barcelona, Spain

IAAPA Bootcamp: Water Parks 2025

29-30 | TBD

NOVEMBER 2025



18-21 | Orlando

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the
Water Park
issue

Lagoon Boom

Inside the
multi-billion-dollar
“Blue Economy”

by Michael Switow



FROM THE SHADE OF AN ELEGANT WHITE CABANA, a family watches as kayakers in bright yellow and orange boats cut across the brilliant blue waters of Evermore Orlando Resort. The \$1.5 billion luxury destination, located just minutes from Walt Disney World, is situated around a 7.78-acre crystalline lagoon—an inland expanse of turquoise water that brings a beach-like experience to landlocked Central Florida.

Built on a portion of a former golf course, the resort features a mix of luxury vacation rental homes, a 433-key Conrad hotel, and private residences with up to 11 bedrooms. The lagoon serves as

the heart of the property, bordered by two beaches—one beside the hotel, spanning 31,700 square feet, and another at the far end with a clubhouse and additional guest amenities. In addition to water-based recreational activities, guests regularly unwind by fire pits, enjoy live music, and attend outdoor movie nights.

“When coming to Florida, people are often forced to decide between the theme parks or the beach. With Evermore Bay, we’ve given our guests the unique option to do both in one location,” explains Stewart Brown, the executive vice president of hospitality for the resort’s owner and developer, Dart Interests.



Kayakers enjoy a morning paddle across the 8-acre lagoon at Evermore Orlando Resort.



EVERMORE

The Appeal of Water

Across the globe, lagoon attractions—including surf parks, artificial beaches and even dining destination resorts—continue to become increasingly popular and bigger, with some extending to 30 acres. Crystal Lagoons, the company behind the Evermore Orlando Resort, currently has 80 lagoons in operation and tells Funworld another 1,000 projects are in development. More than 20 dynamic-wave surf parks are currently in operation, with another 100 in the pipeline.

“The connection between mankind and water is primal,” says Taylor Jeffs, the president and chief creative officer of Legacy Entertainment, which continues to work on large-scale lagoon projects in Mexico, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan. “Just as we’ve seen colossal leaps forward in the sophistication of creativity of dark rides and roller coasters, such is also the case for water park-style experiences. The universe of what’s possible is still expanding at an unfathomable pace.”

Technological Innovations and Environmental Benefits

The global rise of lagoon attractions is rooted in advancing water technologies, real estate, and people’s enduring attraction to water. New systems for wave generation, filtration, and water management continue to transform what’s possible, both creatively and operationally. The water monitoring and filtration systems—offered by companies like Martin Aquatic and Crystal Lagoons—use a fraction of the water, energy, and chemicals of traditional pools.

“Our lagoons can use any type of water, including salt and brackish, are filled only once, and operate in a closed circuit,” says Crystal Lagoons Global



EVERMORE

The lagoon at Evermore is bordered by a family pool to the right, and an outdoor bar and indoor dining options at the top center.



LEFT: When complete, Palm Valley Gold Coast will feature an 18-hole eco-friendly golf course, a five-star hotel, sustainable dining, entertainment, residential spaces.

BELOW: Batavia PIK is envisioned as one of the world's first overwater retail, dining, and entertainment complexes.

Business Director Jean Pierre Juanchich. “We can implement it in any environment—from cities to deserts.”

Juanchich also shares lagoons are a high-impact amenity with low operating costs. “Our lagoons utilize 50 times less energy than a regular pool and 33 times less water than an 18-hole golf course,” he says.

“On a golf course, the water is just being poured into the ground,” explains Craig Stoddart, a director of Thinking Adrenaline, a strategic consultancy that specializes in surf park development. “Apart from evaporation, surf parks don’t waste water because they are contained.”

Business Value and Development Impact

Property development is another factor driving the sector, with lagoons proving to be serious value multipliers in master-planned communities and resorts. In Australia’s Gold Coast, for example, developers at Palm Valley are offering a “front-row seat” to a surf park and golf resort that is touted as the one of the region’s “biggest tourism developments since SeaWorld and Dreamworld.” At a development north of São Paulo, a surf lagoon prompted a six-fold surge in property transactions and greater jump in property values, according to Wavegarden, which has a multi-year partnership with KSM Realty.

Development costs can run between \$40-50 million, not including the cost of new hotels and other buildings. Lagoon attractions that focus on water sports and dining cost significantly less and are more attractive options for cost-conscious developers.

Innovative Lagoon Destinations

In Pantai Indah Kapuk (PIK 2), a huge residential development outside Jakarta, Indonesia, whose name means “Beautiful Bay Beach,” upscale esplanades flank a canal that is the site of a “floating city mall” conceptualized by Legacy Entertainment, Agung Sedayu, and the Salim Group. The promenades link an elaborate network of overwater boardwalks that connect more than 50 restaurants, retail outlets, and entertainment facilities. Visitors dine by the water while enjoying water parades and fountain shows.

“Our client approached us with a significant creative challenge—how to activate an inlet from the Java Sea. We posed several ideas to them and were happy that they gravitated towards the most audacious of them all,” explains Jeffs. “Defying the downturn in retail, the property has been completely packed since opening in June 2023.”



5 Tips for Planning a Successful Lagoon Attraction

1

When selecting a site, keep in mind that **lagoons are easier to build on flat land** with relatively low water tables.

2

Complex, irregular shaped lagoons might look nice, but they are more expensive to develop than rounded ones. Lagoon technologies have economies of scale—the **larger the lagoon, the lower the cost per acre.**

3

During the permitting process, **be prepared to answer questions about water usage.** Statistics comparing lagoons with other attractions, such as golf courses, are useful to have on hand.

4

Liners, rockwork, and edging materials fade or degrade over time. **Select UV-stable, stain-resistant materials** and plan for mid-life refurbishment costs.

5

Wave generation systems in surf parks can be power-intensive, so **plan to optimize with off-peak energy contracts, solar integration, or battery backups.** Include cooling and maintenance time in scheduling to avoid burnout of mechanical systems.

Legacy is undertaking an even more ambitious water-based project in Uzbekistan, one of only two double-landlocked countries in the world, meaning you must cross at least two international borders to reach a coastline. Set to open in 2028, the Grand Serai Resort in Tashkent is a 28-hectare integrated resort with a 10-hectare lake, inspired by folklore and fairy tales.

“We made it our mission not only to present water, but to do it in ways that were shocking and unexpected,” explains Jeffs. “At the heart of our design is a massive lagoon with several functions—think of it as Las Vegas’ Bellagio meets Great Wolf Lodge.”

A waterfront shopping village, large amphitheater, and motorized watercraft will be on one side of the lagoon, while a sprawling beach and swimming lagoon, separated by invisible safety barriers, will be on the other.

Surf Park Technology and Experience

One of the biggest innovations for surf parks is new technology that creates multiple zones, so experts and beginners can surf simultaneously in the same lagoon.

“It’s very similar to a beach,” explains Stoddart’s co-director, Damon Tudor, who is currently working on a major development in Bahrain. “You’ll have a main wave that



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might be out the back, and then where it's already broken, a bay area where the whitewater is great for beginners and kids with boogie boards."

Wavegarden Cove and WhiteWater's Endless Surf are perhaps the best-known providers of these systems, though at least half a dozen new entrants have entered the market in recent years. Wavegarden Cove uses a modular hydrodynamic paddle system, arranged along a central pier, to push water and create programmable waves. Its technology has been deployed at Australia's Urbnsurf, Switzerland's Alaïa Bay, and at the inland United Kingdom surf park named, The Wave. Endless Surf from Whitewater has a pneumatic

system of compressed air chambers that has been deployed at O2 Surftown in Munich, among other locations.

"You want the surfers to have a good experience, but not everyone wants to ride a 2-meter-tall wave," Tudor adds. "This is where surf parks are changing the dynamic. You've got a controlled environment. You've got lifeguards. You can turn the waves on and off."

Tudor estimates surf parks attract 150,000-200,000 active guests a year, plus as many as 100,000 visitors who come to watch the surfers, have a drink, and enjoy the surroundings. Repeat visitation is "off the scale," says Stoddart, who adds that some people use surf parks like a gym, surfing up to 200 times a year.

As these turquoise innovations continue to spread globally, they're proving that with the right technology, any destination, no matter how far it is from the ocean, can create its own slice of paradise. 





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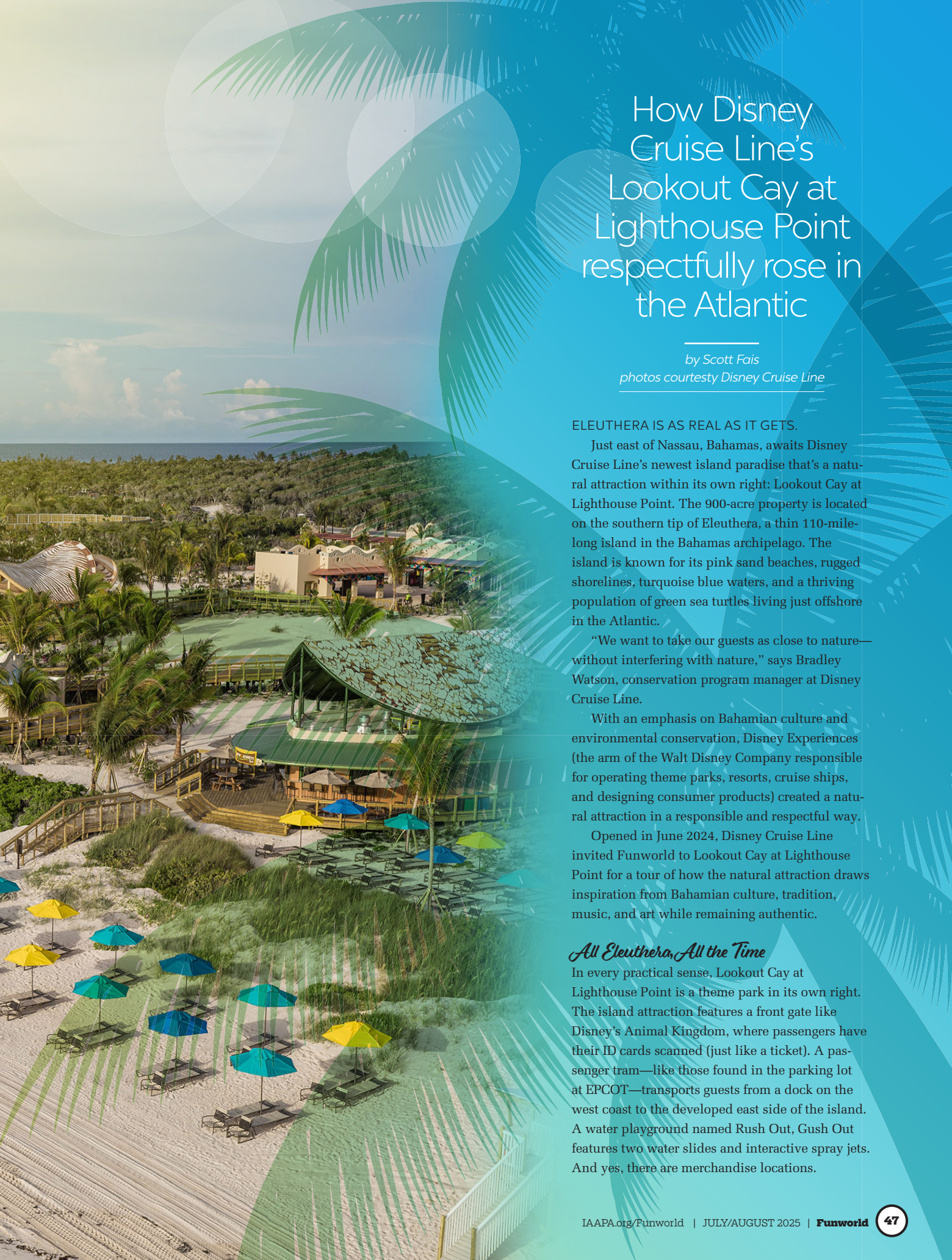
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*the
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Disney Goes Natural in the Atlantic

CREDIT



How Disney Cruise Line's Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point respectfully rose in the Atlantic

by Scott Fais

photos courtesy Disney Cruise Line

ELEUTHERA IS AS REAL AS IT GETS.

Just east of Nassau, Bahamas, awaits Disney Cruise Line's newest island paradise that's a natural attraction within its own right: Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point. The 900-acre property is located on the southern tip of Eleuthera, a thin 110-mile-long island in the Bahamas archipelago. The island is known for its pink sand beaches, rugged shorelines, turquoise blue waters, and a thriving population of green sea turtles living just offshore in the Atlantic.

"We want to take our guests as close to nature—without interfering with nature," says Bradley Watson, conservation program manager at Disney Cruise Line.

With an emphasis on Bahamian culture and environmental conservation, Disney Experiences (the arm of the Walt Disney Company responsible for operating theme parks, resorts, cruise ships, and designing consumer products) created a natural attraction in a responsible and respectful way.

Opened in June 2024, Disney Cruise Line invited Funworld to Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point for a tour of how the natural attraction draws inspiration from Bahamian culture, tradition, music, and art while remaining authentic.

All Eleuthera, All the Time

In every practical sense, Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point is a theme park in its own right. The island attraction features a front gate like Disney's Animal Kingdom, where passengers have their ID cards scanned (just like a ticket). A passenger tram—like those found in the parking lot at EPCOT—transports guests from a dock on the west coast to the developed east side of the island. A water playground named Rush Out, Gush Out features two water slides and interactive spray jets. And yes, there are merchandise locations.



"We had such a great team working on this project. With all those smart minds together, we figured out a way to get it done."

—Bradley Watson, Conservation Program Manager



SCOTT FAIS

So, what's missing? A fictitious backstory.

By comparison, Castaway Cay—the Disney Cruise Line's first private island (opened July 1998)—has an elaborate backstory centered around three explorers and features shipwreck architecture. Decidedly different, Lookout Cay is allowed to be itself with culture and serenity at heart.

"In this particular case, we have to be authentic. That was the commitment from the start," explains Rachel Quinn, vice president of entertainment operations at Disney Cruise Line. "We are here to tell the story of Bahamian culture and share the beauty of the Bahamas. It's not always easy to do that; It makes the road a little harder when you do, but it's so fulfilling and very exciting."

Quinn and her team partnered with the National Junkanoo Committee in The Bahamas to ensure the daily Junkanoo parade—a vibrant Bahamian street parade characterized by colorful, elaborate costumes, energetic music, and

lively dancing—is authentic.

A resident schoolteacher in Eleuthera leads children through arts and crafts projects at the Goombay Cultural Center, that is centrally located.

"We were not going to tell her how we want her to teach our guests.

Instead, she was teaching us! And that's what makes it so special," Quinn tells Funworld.

Eleuthera is home to 8,000 citizens. Many of the cast members filling roles at Lookout Cay are island residents. The Treasures of Eleuthera retail store is dedicated to selling art, jewelry, and tote bags created by Bahamian residents.

On the natural side, sand pathways surrounded by native plants lead to the namesake 1901 lighthouse Disney inherited when purchasing the land in early March 2019. Signage explains the significance of the natural flora and fauna found along the way. Each sign features a QR code that provides additional information.

Accentuating the Natural Side

Engineering and constructing an attraction in the middle of the Atlantic is no easy feat. Preserving the native landscape is even more difficult. To minimize environmental impact, Disney Imagineers designed a trestle pier that avoided the need for dredging. The creation of artificial reefs and the relocation of more than 800 corals aim to protect marine life. A network of elevated bridges across Lookout Cay's eastward-facing coastline prevents habitat loss from foot traffic.

"We wanted to find a way to take advantage of the ocean but also maintain the dune ridges," explains Watson, who shares that Disney stays flexible in the name of conservation. When a grove of mature Lignum Vitae trees (the national tree of the Bahamas) was discovered to be growing in the path of a future road, Watson says Disney rerouted the road. "We said, 'Nope, not there. We're gonna move it somewhere else.'"

Many of the structures Disney built on the island feature a curved roofline that's inspired by seashells found along the beach. Their canvas covers display enlarged paintings from local artists.

Watson says a solar farm, outside of guest view, produces 90% of the power Lookout Cay needs to operate.

A Lesson in Logistics

Construction at Lighthouse Point began in spring 2022, following years of meticulous planning.

"We did an environmental impact assessment, and through that process, we really learned a lot about this site," Watson says. "It gave us an informed way to make decisions about where we would

ABOVE: The eastward side of the developed space features elevated boardwalks to reduce traffic on natural dunes.

BELOW: Rooflines are designed to resemble seashells and feature tops displaying the artwork of Bahamian artists.



place buildings and how we would build structures.”

Angela Wu, an assistant construction manager with Walt Disney Imagineering, shares that everything—from tools to hard-
scape—had to be ordered, packaged, and shipped from mainland Florida.

“It is not an easy process. Everything that came here mostly arrived on a boat from a port,” she says. Disney built a small dock to receive materials arriving from Port Everglades, a cruise and container port located in Fort Lauderdale approximately 260 miles west of Eleuthera. (In a sustainable move, this original dock is now used to assist with provisioning the more than half dozen food and beverage locations.)

“There’s a lot that our team had to do to plan to make sure we had materials here on time,” Wu shares. “When you’re building in Florida, you’re like, ‘Hey, I need some nuts and bolts and washers. Let me run to Home Depot.’ You don’t have that here.”

Wu spent two years living on Eleuthera during construction. Commuting 40-minutes from a townhouse north of Lighthouse Point gave her the opportunity to meet her neighbors.

“You know what cars people drive and when somebody passes you,” she says. “I’ve been able to build a lot of relationships with people in the local community, which is something that I just absolutely treasure,” she says.

Natural is the Future

Disney plans to return 192 acres of its 900 acres the company purchased to the Bahamian government for preservation. When the island opened in June 2024, only 16% of the property was developed. Moving forward, Disney pledges to develop less than 20% of its total acreage.

During the attraction’s first year of operation, Disney Cruise Line listened to guest feedback and now provides several additional amenities.

Wagons are available for parents to use when pulling their children along a pier to an entrance at Mabrika Cove. Before



SCOTT FAIS



ABOVE: The island’s Junkanoo parade concludes at the Goombay Cultural Center.

LEFT: The Treasures of Eleuthera gift store features art and goods made locally.

arriving at the front gate, guests are offered a refreshing cold towel.

Near the Goombay Cultural Center, four additional character meet-and-greet locations allow for greater capacity.

And once guests return to the ship, cold towels are provided again, along with complimentary flavored waters.

The additional amenities join an expanding fleet. The new Disney Destiny is slated for a November 2025 debut as the third ship in the Wish class joins the Disney Wish and Disney Treasure.

With five ships in the current fleet and eight others already in development through 2031, Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point will remain a natural attraction in demand for its serenity and connection to nature. **FW**

“You never know when a new connection will help you in the future.”

—Angela Wu, Assistant Construction Manager



SCOTT FAIS



Rush Out Gush Out is an interactive water play area for children of all ages.


A woman with curly hair, wearing a bright green tank top and a red sarong, is hula hooping with a multi-colored LED hula hoop. She is smiling and has her arms raised. In the background, another person is visible, also with their arms raised. The scene is illuminated by warm white string lights hanging across the frame.

*the
Water Park
issue*

Wet 'n Late

How water parks retool
for evening operation

by Scott Fais



HOT NIGHTS AND COOL DRINKS, mixed with a rockin' soundtrack and smooth slides under the stars can make a splash at water parks. Extending the operating day past sunset by offering specialty programing can create buzz, drive incremental attendance, and generate new revenue for facilities on summer nights.

"Essentially, we're picking up extra days," says Brad Gilmore, park president of Aquatica Orlando. "In this Orlando market, there's so many day guests visiting the dry parks that can come to AquaGlow, because we're open from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m."

The Orlando market is home to a half dozen gated water parks. This year, four of the six facilities have evening events on the calendar, each requiring guests to purchase a special event ticket. Here are 10 components to keep in mind—with an emphasis on safety—when planning to get wet and staying up late.

1. Adding Night Lights

Creating a fresh atmosphere with the addition of lighting sets a nighttime operation apart. Now in its sophomore year, AquaGlow at Orlando's Aquatica bathes slide structures in colorful hues using theatrical uplighting. Pathways are lit by illuminated jellyfish hanging above. Water safety expert Wess Long, president of StarGuard Elite, a company providing water safety training programs and operational support, says water parks need to add additional lighting for an evening event. "Lighting around the pool decks and attractions is critically important," Long tells Funworld. "Underwater lighting is critical so that there are not any dark areas or shadows." He advocates for slide tower stairs, guest pathways, and egress areas to be illuminated, reminding operators that "most jurisdictions have definitive lumens requirements for both pools and their immediate decks."

2. Adding New Amenities

Adding a new attraction or enhancing others can entice guests to invest in a ticket. Aquatica's Tassie's Underwater Twist is an enclosed bowl slide that doubles as an immersive theater with sea creatures projected on the walls. During AquaGlow, the media and music are switched to match the energy of the event. "Think of a psychedelic lava lamp-type experience that you're inside of before dumping out into our lazy river," Gilmore says. Both AquaGlow and Island

Nights at Island H2O Water Park in Kissimmee, Florida, add foam pits. "Foam helps add to the party aspect of the night. People love to dance in foam—more so at night when it's glowing," says Dawn Priebe, general manager of at Island

H2O. At the Walt Disney World Resort, Disney H2O Glow After Hours at Disney's Typhoon Lagoon adds a DJ where guests can dance in the sand with Toy Story characters.

3. Advertising the Splash

Marketing the Island Nights event at Island H2O takes many forms. "As with any marketing campaign, a variety of channels work best to get in front of our specific demographic," says Trisha Sissons, the park's sales and marketing manager. "However, we see great results via social. This is due to a combination of factors based on demo, sharing, visual representation of the event." When Aquatica opened AquaGlow in May, they invited traditional press and local influencers on a Friday night. The after-work party allowed the media to conduct interviews with Gilmore and sample culinary delights, with the request each media outlet make several posts on their social media channels.

4. Admission Plans for All

Disney H2O Glow After Hours at Disney's Typhoon Lagoon caters to families with three hours of additional slide time following park close, although guests can arrive two hours early.



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TOP AND CENTER: The slides and rivers at Aquatica are bathed in specialty lighting. **ABOVE:** Bright AquaGlow cupcakes are served across Aquatica.

MIDDLE: Private label specialty brews are sold only during AquaGlow.

ABOVE RIGHT: Foam parties are popular offerings. **RIGHT:** Dance parties on the sand allow guests to dry off and keep the party moving.

Meanwhile, Island H2O Water Park decided to go age 21 and older after market research showed adults wanted a night out—without kids. “They [adults] wanted to be a kid again by riding slides, lounging in the lazy river, or playing in the wave pool. Hosting a party for 21+ provides a safe space for adults to play again,” Sissons shares. At press time, Disney H2O Glow After Hours at Disney’s Typhoon Lagoon cost \$85 ages 10+ and \$42.50 ages 3-9 and includes ice cream novelties, popcorn, and soft drinks. Island Nights at Island H2O Water Park uses dynamic pricing for the event with tickets starting at \$35 and climbing to \$46. AquaGlow at Aquatica also uses dynamic pricing with tickets starting at \$59 and climbing to \$73. Volcano Bay Nights at Universal Orlando—a spring event taking place in April and May—cost \$99 per person and included parking.

5. Operationally Speaking

Each event operates on select evenings when it makes the most sense for the operator’s business goals. While some parks, like Typhoon Lagoon, will roll seamlessly from daytime into nighttime operation, others will close, sweep the park, and reset. “Island H2O has tried several different methods,” shares Priebe, the park’s general manager. “We have found that hosting a full day of fun in the park for our daytime visitors, then fully closing prior to opening back up for night has worked best. This allows us to do a full reset of the water park, plug in the lights, get the DJ queued up, prep those Mar-Glowrita’s [an adult beverage offering] and provide our guests with an exceptional experience created just for them.”

6. Safety Staffing

At the heart of every evening water park event, is the frontline staff needed to procure the fun. “I would strongly suggest additional supervision be provided for nighttime [operations], so there is increased oversight and support,” says Long with StarGuard Elite. Aquatica will recruit lifeguards ahead of the busy summer season. “We really tailor to all of our lifeguards, and we can give them just the right amount of hours,” says Gilmore. “Some people want a part time job, we’ve got that for them. Some people want full time hours, we’ve got that for them.”

At Island H2O, the park is staffed by what Priebe calls “a hybrid operation.”

“We rely on external partners to assist with security, ID check, and traffic flow; while our internal team is scheduled for either day or night to ensure exceptional customer service,” explains Priebe. “Because this is a 21+ event and runs past midnight, we make sure that we have adults working the evening shifts.”

7. Training

An evening operation presents new challenges. “Training lifeguards for nighttime





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operations must include conducting the actual training during these hours. It's imperative to recreate the same conditions so the staff are properly prepared," Long says. Thus, facility owners and operators need to budget labor hours for a dress rehearsal. He recommends lifeguards become familiar with "surveillance differences," whether it be in a wave pool or at the lazy river. Plus, all training should include a practice execution of the park's emergency action plan (EAP). Long also recommends operators keep in mind the transitional hours from sunset to dusk, with these times creating their "own unique challenges of glares and lighting that are different than full daylight or complete dark periods."

8. Employee Care


For water parks that will retain staffing from a daytime operation, Long recommends facilities give lifeguards a period to decompress. "Staff should absolutely be given a dinner break and the opportunity to refresh and reset prior to the nighttime operation." He encourages operators to encourage good nutrition for their frontline staff. "Energy boosters—like coffee or other caffeine

products—may have a short-term benefit, but sometimes can lead to a crash later," he explains. Gilmore says managers need to recognize the efforts of their frontline team. "I am incredibly proud of our team: our entertainment team, our operating team, and our culinary team for putting on such an incredible event," he says.

9. Adding Security

Adding visible and uniformed security is also a wise idea as the sun goes down. This creates an environment of safety and sends the message that shenanigans will not be tolerated. At Island H2O, the park works with both local law enforcement and an outside security vendor. "Nighttime events have their own unique operations that an extra layer of staffing helps," Priebe explains. "For instance, we have local law enforcement help with road crossing to our parking lot."

10. Food and Beverage

One word: cupcakes. It's all about a brightly colored cupcake. Several operators suggest a limited-edition menus must include Instagramable desserts to be shared on social media by guests. "We have cupcakes that go every restaurant unit. And of course, we've also amped those up." Fancy flatbreads, wings smothered in a unique sauce, and special sliders with creative toppings are food items that can be produced in large batches that will satisfy hungry bathers on the go. Aquatica also offers its own specialty brew named AquaGlow Tropical Wheat Ale. 



Gain additional insight and watch how Aquatica Orlando transforms at sunset with AquaGlow. Visit IAAPA.org/AquaGlow



SKYPARK AT
SANTA'S VILLAGE:

HOW A
CALIFORNIA CLASSIC
REIMAGINED ITSELF

A long-shuttered attraction
transforms into an
eco-friendly adventure

story and photos by Michael Costello

Trespassing. It's a misdemeanor governed by California Penal Code Section 602 ... and an offense Santa Claus would frown upon.

But, for Bill and Michelle Johnson, the owners of SkyPark at Santa's Village, sneaking into the shuttered attraction to carve out bike trails led to its rescue.

"We used to trespass here mountain biking; it was the best mountain biking," Michelle reminisces.

Sure, the couple inevitably got kicked out. Now, they won't leave.

"We kind of didn't know what we were getting into, which was probably good," Michelle admits in retrospect.

Nestled in the San Bernardino Mountains, along the Rim of the World Highway, Santa's Village originally opened as a Christmas-themed amusement park in 1955—just six weeks prior to Disneyland Park's opening in Anaheim, located 90 minutes west. After 43 years, Santa's Village became worn and tired, ultimately closing in 1998.

With the gates shuttered, Bill still felt connected to the property where he first worked as a ride operator at age 13. Little could he have imagined as an adolescent, the park would become his sandbox.

Following 16 years of abandonment, the property popped up on the market. That's when the Johnsons stepped back into the dense, southward-facing forests—this time, legally.

Bill and Michelle saw possibility in the property where others saw obstacles. With little salvageable infrastructure and the need to upgrade the power grid, the couple began an ambitious project.

"When we first bought it, we were just gonna make it a mountain bike park," Michelle shares. "It wasn't even going to be Santa's Village."

Their concept quickly evolved into something much greater—operating an adventure park with deep community ties and a festive spirit.

THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

After the Johnsons bought the property, California families began sharing their memories, asking to recreate past experiences with new generations.

"We get a lot of people that come back. They want to do the same picture with Santa in the same house as their grandpa," Michelle shares.

Understanding this deep emotional connection, the couple knew they had to incorporate the original theme into the revitalization.

"If we said, 'Oh, we're just going to do a mountain bike park,' I don't think that would have gone over super well," Michelle explains. The couple's decision to integrate adventure-based attractions alongside the inventory of historic log-constructed, "north pole-themed" Christmas structures helped rally the community behind their vision.



A festive themed map helps guests navigate the attraction.



Retaining and restoring the village's timber-framed structures required old world craftsmanship. Locally sourced wood carefully replaced rotted logs, retaining the original gingerbread details.

"A lot of the logs on the bottom portion of the buildings have to be replaced more frequently," Michelle tells Funworld.

Serving as SkyPark's art director, Michelle's thumbprint can be found on all aspects of the park. This includes a color palette that successfully integrates its Christmas theme.

Remodeling of the park's unique bakery stopped midcourse to ensure a seamless design. The original colors of yellow, pink, and purple didn't feel right to Michelle.

"I painted it, and then I was like, 'This is awful.'"

While crews preserved the original features of the bakery, including the structure's original wooden doors, complete with rot iron hardware, the building now sports SkyPark's cohesive color scheme. "Again, it's the best of both worlds. It's kind of like old fashioned, but it's really cute!" she says.

CREATING A BROAD PORTFOLIO

SkyPark's network of bike paths wind through the park's 150 acres of pine forest. Groomed daily by park staff, the bike trails

are equipped with obstacles that cater to different skill levels. A bike shop (housed in one of the original log buildings) offers bicycle rentals, new bikes for purchase, gear, and park-branded merchandise.

For the small fry, SkyPark offers a first opportunity at riding a balanced bike. A scaled down bike trail attraction allows children to build the confidence.

The price of admission includes all outdoor attractions—from bike trails to archery, rock climbing, pedal cars, and roller skating (or ice skating in the winter).

While all the traditional amusement park style mechanical rides were auctioned after the 1998 closure, one attraction remains, albeit in an evolved form blending flawlessly with the park's new format.

Reutilizing the park's suspended monorail track, guests can now climb

Michelle's fresh color palette updated the park's historic structures with a timeless look and feel.



BEFORE



AFTER

NATIONAL AMUSEMENT PARK HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



Visitors can enjoy adventure-based attractions, such as the B Rail, a unique, self-powered monorail ride (left), and Frozen Falls Climbing Tower (right).

aboard a new style of ride vehicle they traverse by pedaling. During the park's ongoing redevelopment, Bill worked in his spare time to perfect the new style of ride. Guests board the attraction in the original station before embarking on a course that's upwards of 40 feet above the park's walkways below. Some of the monorail's original cars sit in place as decoration.

LODGING ON HOLIDAY

Highlighting the need to increase length of guest stay, coupled with the distance of the park from metropolitan areas, Bill acknowledges a campground was in the park's best interest strategically. "I realized I didn't even want to open the park unless we were able to get a permit to do a campground as part of it," he says.

Today, SkyPark Camp + RV Resort sits across the highway from the park and provides a scenic and full-service campground. Within the camp is SkyStream Resort featuring a half dozen vintage

SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS AT SKYPARK AT SANTA'S VILLAGE

by Michael Costello

To further increase the favorability for those visiting from long distances, SkyPark at Santa's Village welcomes electric vehicles (EV) with four dozen EV chargers at the park entrance.

At the campground, the restroom building was constructed with a south-facing roof with a pitch of 22.5 degrees—perfect not for Santa's sleigh, rather the 70 high-output solar panels up top.

The park operates with strict conservation guidelines, having undergone a full environmental impact report to meet California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) standards.

Beyond energy efficiency, ADA accessibility is another priority. The park's original layout posed challenges due to its hilly terrain, but rather than compromising the park's original buildings all situated at different levels within the park, Bill designed new pathways with a maximum 5% grade. Opting for concrete walkways over traditional blacktop, the choice was driven by environmental and practical considerations. Concrete is more durable in freezing conditions, easier to maintain, and free of petroleum-based oils that can leach into the soil.

By using materials from their own community, the park reduced transport emissions while supporting local businesses.

"Using your local resources, is important to understand what you have access to," says Bill.

The result? A beautiful, resilient, and eco-conscious park that seamlessly blends sustainability with accessibility.



Just steps away from the park's front gate, SkyPark Camp + RV Resort and its vintage Airstream campers are situated on a bluff overlooking the San Bernardino Valley.



Guests of SkyPark at Santa's Village can rent or purchase bikes and gear in the bike shop (pictured left) before exploring the property's network of trails where wooden structures are built into the expansive landscape alongside mature trees (pictured right).

Airstream trailers. Inside, guests find high end mattresses, sleeper sofas or trundle beds, along with modern amenities, such as Keurig coffee bars, fireplaces, air conditioning, mini refrigerators, and a patio with a gas firepit. Bath linens are also provided for showers and restroom facilities can be found in the Camp Bath House. Airstream guests have exclusive use of a communal kitchen area and cooking equipment, and a full-service laundry room. Park admission is offered at a discount to SkyStream guests.



A NIMBLE MINDSET FOR SUCCESS

Despite their success as natural attraction operators, the Johnsons have faced quandaries.

One challenge was blending their unique branding—balancing adventure with holiday magic was not an easy feat. “At the beginning, it was really difficult to mash it together... but now people kind of know who we are,” Michelle says. Even today, some still don’t realize that SkyPark is open year-round or that it reopened after the years of closure and abandonment.

Operational adjustments also proved necessary. After guests did not want to spend time at their sit-down restaurant, the facility was quickly transformed into a fast-casual barbecue eatery. The new quick serve style immediately proved successful. “We are the board of directors, so if we need to change something, we just change it,” Michelle explains.

Today, the park’s robust inventory of food and beverage offerings include the barbecue restaurant; a sandwich and ice cream shop; a patio grill with burgers, pizza, sandwiches, and drinks on the menu; the bakery serving fresh baked goods all prepared on site by an in-house pastry chef; and a bar—thanks to a gift from decades ago.

After the Johnsons acquired the property, they worked to clear heaps of insulation, drywall, and an old cash register when they found what Bill refers to as their Bible.

“At the very bottom of the pile was the accounting for 1976, ‘77 and ‘78, all done by hand, everything on ledgers,” he recalls. “It was a cheat sheet. Our worst performing building was the doll shop. We took it out, got a liquor license, and put in a bar. It’s now our number one performing building.”

LOOKING AHEAD

SkyPark at Santa’s Village has successfully combined adventure and nostalgia, building a space where adventure seekers and holiday enthusiasts can come together. “The broad vision has been accomplished,” Michelle reflects, though she acknowledges as operators they continue to make changes based on guest feedback.

For the Johnsons, SkyPark is more than just a facility—it’s a labor of love, fueled by memories, community support, and a spirit of innovation. Their journey (that may have begun with a little harmless trespassing) proves that sometimes, taking a leap of faith—without knowing all the challenges ahead—can lead to something truly extraordinary. **FW**



Guests are invited to shop for themed souvenirs, including Stories of the Northwoods, a Christmas-themed book based on the park’s original intellectual property mascot dog and Johnson’s family pet, Arrow.



3... 2... 1... Get the Party Started!

How attractions stage New Year's Eve celebrations

by Michael Costello and Juliana Gilling



LAKE COMPOUNCE

WITHIN SIX MONTHS, New Year's Eve events around the globe will bring people together. Many are familiar with the confetti-covered crowds waiting for the Times Square ball drop in New York City, the Copacabana Beach partygoers in Rio, and the masses singing Auld Lang Syne as fireworks fizz off of the London Eye along the River Thames in the United Kingdom. Attractions of all kinds can use New Year's Eve to drive shoulder season attendance and revenue by giving guests new ways to celebrate with those who matter most.

Many attractions already have the infrastructure and experience to accommodate New Year's Eve events. While there are operational challenges, such as increased costs and a greater need for staffing late into the night, these events can generate new revenue, capitalize on festive décor already in place, and provide a memorable shared experience for first-time and returning guests.

The Complete Package

For the Mabu Thermas Grand Resort and Blue Park water park in Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil, the right moment to offer a New Year's Eve event came with a simple realization. They weren't just offering a place to stay and have fun—they were creating lasting memories.

"What makes our event stand out is the all-encompassing experience," says Diego Garcia, sales director at Mabu Hotels & Resorts. "We operate within a unique ecosystem that includes a hotel, resort, and water park. The Mabu New Year's Eve celebration blends exceptional infrastructure, high-end cuisine, attractions for all ages, thermal waters, and the energy of Blue Park, with over 62,000 square meters of pure entertainment."

Mabu's event answers the growing demand from families for

unique year-end celebrations within a fun, safe, and welcoming environment. "From personalized service to themed décor, everything is designed to ensure guests feel special," Garcia says.

Tailored programming for children, teenagers, and adults keeps everyone happy. Parents can unwind with gourmet food and live music, while Mabu entertains the kids with themed activities and shows. "We create a space where all generations can share the joy of the moment," Garcia says.

Mabu's team listens closely to guest feedback. "This open dialogue has been vital in strengthening guest loyalty and improving the event year after year."

In Brazil, New Year's Eve coincides with the height of summer. Families often travel to the coast, visiting places like Beach Park on Porto das Dunas beach in Aquiraz, Brazil. This year, Beach Park presents two major new attractions.

Named Surreal, this WhiteWater Master Blaster water coaster takes inspiration from surfing, with curves, speed, and drops that simulate the feeling of riding a wave. Beach Park has also opened Arvorar Park, a nature-focused theme park.

Children enjoy the company of a reindeer and snowman at Lake Compounce's New Years Eve event, which caps their Holiday Lights season.



At City Museum in St. Louis, Missouri, staff members fill a net with balloons in preparation for an 8 p.m., child-focused "balloon drop".

According to Beach Park CEO Murilo Pascoal, the result is a destination where "guests can enjoy thrilling rides, reconnect with family and the natural world, celebrate local culture, and ring in the new year by the sea in an unforgettable way."

Beach Park provides a festive event with entertainment for all ages, where generations can celebrate togetherness, warmth, and the magic of starting the new year as a family. Beach Park's team continually seeks ways to enhance the guest experience.

Dining is an essential part of any celebration, and Beach Park has expanded its New Year's Eve food and beverage offerings. The park prepares curated menus featuring regional flavors, themed food stations, signature cocktails, and specially crafted dishes.

"Our resorts and parks already offer the structure and services that families trust, and the New Year's Eve event amplifies that, transforming the night into a moment of true connection and joy. It's not just a party—it's a shared memory in the making," Pascoal says.

Strategic Programming for Multigenerational Guests

Carowinds in North Carolina first began ringing in the new year in 2018. "We realized that family-friendly options to celebrate the New Year were limited in the Charlotte area," explains Ryan Allen, director of live entertainment at Carowinds. With families already enjoying WinterFest, Carowinds saw the potential for expansion and decided New Year's Eve was a perfect fit. On Dec. 31, Carowinds extends its WinterFest hours to allow guests the opportunity to bid farewell to the old year.

Carowinds' team revamps the programming to ensure guests

enjoy a top-notch WinterFest and a memorable New Year's Eve. At 9 p.m., the entire amusement park transforms into a party. "The park's background music changes, live bands perform, and DJs keep the energy going. My favorite is our Kids' Countdowns; these happen hourly in Camp Snoopy, giving kids the chance to celebrate before bedtime," Allen says. Besides the entertainment and fireworks, the park offers limited-time food and beverage items, described by Allen as "specialty sips and tastes."

Carowinds considers Santa's elves, too. "We ensure our fabulous cast and staff get to be part of the celebration."

A Guest-Centered Focus

Lake Compounce in Bristol, Connecticut, designed its New Year's Eve event with young families' needs in mind. Like Carowinds, the theme park offers an earlier countdown so children can join in the excitement. "Add in beloved characters, festive lights and music, dance parties, select rides, fireworks, and a magical atmosphere, and it's the perfect way for families to welcome the new year together," says Marketing Director Meg Forno. "New Year's Eve feels like the perfect grand finale to our Holiday Lights season."

At PortAventura World in Barcelona, Spain, guest comfort is a priority at its New Year's Eve event. The park began celebrating New Year's Eve with the opening of its hotels—initially with in-hotel dinners and a party afterward at La Cantina Mariachi. "As we grew and inaugurated the convention center, we moved the celebration there, allowing guests to enjoy everything in one space. Currently, we celebrate New Year's Eve with over 2,500 guests," says park spokesperson Judith Lleixà Buch.

The park's gala buffet satisfies guests' diverse tastes, while live performances, shows, and a New Year's Eve countdown are also on the menu.

Key Takeaways From Successful Events

At City Museum, housed in an old shoe warehouse in St. Louis, children can slide, jump, climb, and play in

artful surroundings. Six months out, the museum is already looking ahead to its fourth New Year's Eve Party.

The team knew of "Noon Year's Eve" hotel events but chose a different approach. "We wanted to make ours a little closer to a nightly celebration," explains Katy Enrique, director of sales and marketing. Guests can enjoy the museum's lights and decorations all day, and then the New Year's Eve festivities run 5-9 p.m. "It gives families a chance to have fun with their kids and still get everybody in bed at a reasonable time," Enrique says.

Experience has taught the team to book entertainment early, before demand drives up costs and limits availability. Family activities and crafts—such as scavenger hunts and button-making—are always a hit. Face painters and balloon animal artists add to the fun.

Careful scheduling ensures the evening runs smoothly. After wrapping up the activities around 7 p.m., the team brings everyone together for a DJ-led dance party. Guests can toast the new year with



sparkling, non-alcoholic juice before a big balloon drop at 8 p.m.

The kids love popping the balloons," Enrique adds. Lucky guests will find prizes, such as tickets, inside some balloons.

City Museum's New Year's Eve Party is part of the popular Weirdly Wonderful Holidays event, included with general admission. "It's definitely an attendance driver for us," Enrique confirms. The team takes great pride in the return on investment and high guest satisfaction rates. "Our team is happy to do it. We feel like we end the year on a really good, fun, positive note with our guests. We just love this event." **FW**

On New Year's Eve at City Museum, a child participates in a button-making activity with the help of a staff member.



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Close Encounters of the Otter Kind

Developing animal encounter experiences

by Heather Larson

TODAY'S AQUARIUM AND ZOO VISITORS seek more than passive observation of marine life and wildlife in carefully designed habitats. Increasingly, they seek immersive, interactive experiences that engage the senses, deepen their understanding of individual species, and foster meaningful connections with the natural world. With this knowledge in mind, the Vancouver Aquarium in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, decided to develop an animal encounter experience. The Herschend-owned attraction gives Funworld an inside look at how planners developed an opportunity to see animals up close.

When weighing which marine animal to feature in an up-close-and-personal encounter, the Vancouver Aquarium decided on the answer: focus on local. The attraction already had a program in place that rescued orphaned northern sea otter pups. The Marine Mammal Rescue Center, also located in Vancouver, not only rescues the sea otters, but also rehabilitates them and uses them for research and education.

Further investigation demonstrated that otters are both participatory and intelligent, says Danika Strecko, senior education manager at the aquarium. "Encounters with guests also provide enrichment for the sea otters."

The collaborative team working on the Sea Otter Encounter prior to opening the private tour knew visitors would have a memorable experience with these semiaquatic mammals. But first, they had to make sure the additionally priced tour worked for everyone, especially the otters.

Key Considerations

A lot of thought went into Vancouver's Sea Otter Encounter during the planning stage. Strecko provided key content and trained interpretive staff. She also worked with the marketing and communications team, deciding what the guest-facing messaging would be. That team then developed announcements to be placed in the aquarium's newsletter—shared by word of mouth—and press releases. However, before any of that could happen, the primary concern was that the habitat must be safe for all involved: otters, visitors, and zoo personnel.

An existing habitat had to be refurbished because it was previously designed to be a wet lab touch pool for invertebrates like starfish, sea urchins, and marine animals found along the British Columbia coastline. Even after

modifications were completed, Strecko would still like to see the habitat become more accessible to more guests. That includes leveling the rocky, uneven ground and widening narrow passageways.

“We constantly need to make sure our marine mammals have protective contact. There’s always a safety barrier,” says Strecko. “The sea otters are invited to participate [in the encounter], but they can leave if they want.”

In addition, the otters had to be trained for the visitor experience. “The beautiful thing about the sea otter encounter is that it allows the participants a glimpse of what the trainers do with the otters every day, so most of it is part of their regular routine. On top of this, we built up reinforcement history in the encounter space, meaning we did more training and enrichment sessions in that area so they would feel comfortable there,” says Todd Hauptman, manager, communications at the aquarium.

For a variety of reasons, these rescued sea otters can’t be released back into the wild. Meantime, it’s key that animals destined for reintroduction and release have as little interaction and reliance on direct human care as possible. This supports their independence and success once released, explains Hauptman.

Guests who sign up for the special experience are given a conservation-focused survey, where they are reminded that the aquarium has many accreditations, including the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and Canada’s Accredited Zoos and Aquariums.

Planners also encountered some surprise learnings along the way. One of them? That guests strongly connected with the marine mammals—more so than anticipated.

“Their love and care shone through,” says Strecko. “This is our second year of operation, and we already have repeat guests. And we’ve been sold out since the day we opened in 2024 with no paid marketing.”

Even after the otter encounter tour opened and guests paid for the behind-the-scenes experience, the work wasn’t finished. The aquarium staff asks guests to fill

Planning Step-by-Step

What happens during the Vancouver Aquarium’s Sea Otter Encounter experience? Several departments came together to plan every step of the guest journey.

Welcome and Education

Upon first meeting with the education interpreters, guests are asked to sign a waiver. The interpreters tell otter rescue stories, their care requirements and explain enrichment exercises. Guests can ask questions and learn even more in the 50- to 60-minute time frame that begins the tour.

Backstage

The habitat where part of the encounter takes place is customarily unavailable to guests. There, those on the tour can watch the marine mammals show off their natural behaviors that include flips, somersaults, and whatever other antics they’re inclined to do.

Food Prep and Feeding

Trainers show guests how to prepare food. Otters have it quite good when it comes to their diet. “They eat clams, capelin (in the smelt family), squid, and shrimp as their main diet,” says Juliana Kim, curator of marine mammals. Guided by a Marine Mammal Trainer, encounter participants get to serve the otters lunch by tossing fish to them.

Do-It-Yourself Enrichment


Planners designed the program to allow participants to delve into the enrichment program for otters. Guests may plan and devise an enrichment session all their own. No two play sessions for the otters will ever be alike. The enrichment session is designed to invigorate the otters’ senses and sharpen their minds. Visitors are then given the opportunity to touch the paw of an otter. Strecko says the otters comply about 90% of the time.

out a survey. From the results of these surveys, the aquarium team compiles a monthly report to ensure everything is still relevant.


“Through this information, we evaluate if our learning outcomes are being met, and it gives us statistics on the number of bookings and if our revenue is what it needs to be,” says Hauptman.

The fee for the Sea Otter Encounter runs \$370 CAD for five guests who are members and \$420 CAD for five non-member guests. Admission to the Vancouver Aquarium is not included in the experience fee.

Determining the pricing became a collaborative effort among different departments. The aquarium needed a price point that would cover all their expenses and still leave some revenue for the education budget.

Vancouver Aquarium’s sea otter experience reflects a thoughtful balance of guest engagement, animal welfare, and educational purpose. Through careful habitat planning, staff training, and continuous feedback, the aquarium has developed an experience that deepens visitor understanding of marine life while supporting conservation efforts. The program’s success highlights the importance of aligning immersive guest experiences with the wellbeing of the animals and the organization’s broader mission. 



Heather Larson writes for several trade publications, including Funworld. She resides in the state of Washington, which has very few theme parks, so she lives vicariously through Funworld. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#) .





How (and Why) to Create a Press Kit

Ensuring an attraction receives the coverage it deserves

by Lisa A. Beach

JOURNALISTS ON DEADLINE often face frustration when visiting an attraction's website, only to find no press contact, no downloadable photos, and no basic park facts to quickly incorporate into a story. With today's reporters stretched thin, covering multiple beats with limited resources, attractions—especially smaller ones with modest marketing budgets—should aim to provide a professional, accessible online press kit. It's not just a nice-to-have; it's essential for ensuring accurate coverage and staying visible in a competitive media landscape.

Why Digital Press Kits are Critical for Small Attractions

For smaller attractions with limited resources, a well-crafted digital press kit functions as a strategic—and efficient—marketing asset.

"We really count on leveraging our media and public relations activities to supplement our advertising," explains Katie Gray, manager of strategic communications at Toronto Zoo. "Media covering those stories is really doing some of the advertising dollar work for you."



"We really count on leveraging our media and public relations activities to supplement our advertising."

—Katie Gray, Toronto Zoo



"A press kit is ultimately a storytelling tool."

—Hayley Bogaard, Dreamworld Theme Park

This supplemental marketing piece becomes increasingly valuable as media resources continue to shrink. "A press kit is ultimately a storytelling tool," explains Hayley Bogaard, marketing and PR executive at Dreamworld Theme Park in Queensland, Australia. "As communications professionals, it's our role to shape the narrative and make it as straightforward as possible for journalists to share it—accurately, quickly, and with impact." She notes that it's a chance to guide the story rather than rely on the media to fill in the gaps.

"A well-organized digital press kit can be essential to obtain media coverage while showcasing your attraction with accurate messaging and visuals," points out Quinn Bryner, director of public relations at Hershey Entertainment & Resorts in Hershey, Pennsylvania. "Ten years ago, we had a physical press kit consisting of a folder with printed fact sheets, press releases, brochures and a jump drive of photos. Now, our press kit is digital/mobile-first and customizable based on the needs of each journalist."



"A well-organized digital press kit can be essential to obtain media coverage while showcasing your attraction with accurate messaging and visuals."

—Quinn Bryner, Hershey Entertainment & Resorts

Common Mistakes and Pitfalls

Even with the best intentions, many attractions stumble when creating press kits. "Common missteps include outdated information, low-resolution images, broken links, or a lack of clear contact details," notes Bogaard. Another big mistake? Overloading the kit with too much promotional language rather than sticking to factual, media-ready content. "A press kit isn't a brochure—it should make a

journalist's job easier, not harder," she advises.

Visuals are the make-or-break factor—dynamic images help your story stand out in a crowded inbox, while outdated assets can send your pitch straight to the recycle bin.

Anatomy of an Effective Press Kit

"Giving [journalists] what they need and making it easy for them will benefit you so much down the road—and doesn't take a big lift," Gray emphasizes.

What should an effective press kit include?

- A concise fact sheet with up-to-date stats, history, and key visitor information
- Recent press releases highlighting news, events, or new attractions
- High-quality, downloadable images
- High-definition b-roll footage available for download
- Quotes and soundbites from leadership or subject matter experts
- Clear, direct contact information
- Suggested story angles, especially those tied to trending topics

"We anticipate the high-level bullet points media or influencers might need to accurately understand our offerings and also provide soundbites from key spokespeople," says Bryner. Her team also assumes media might not be able to send a crew to experience offerings directly. "Our goal is to bring the experience to them electronically with high impact visuals," she explains.

Real-World Success Stories

A well-crafted press kit can deliver impressive media results. Gray shared how her team's specialized press kit for their Wildlife Health Center opening gave journalists everything they needed, from technical background to scientific details to conservation narratives. Their niche assets made it easy for everyone to find their angle.

At Dreamworld, Bogaard credits their evolving press kit for the sustained buzz around the launch of their Rivertown precinct. By updating the kit with construction milestones, ride details, and behind-the-scenes visuals, they kept media engaged over months, not just on opening day. "It became one of the most widely covered projects we've had in years," she notes.

Bryner said Hersheypark shared a media alert with drone footage of the topping-off moment of their new Twizzlers Twisted Gravity giant swing that opened in May. "It was a perspective of our skyline that only we could get, which led to strong TV and online coverage in our local market," she says.

Creating a Professional Kit on a Budget

Building a polished press kit doesn't require deep pockets. "It's completely achievable on a small budget," Bogaard points out. She suggests using free tools like Canva to design clean, branded materials, and store them in a shared folder via Google Drive or

Dropbox. "And one well-planned photo-shoot per year can yield a strong bank of images for both PR and marketing."

Technology has democratized content creation. "The technology today... it doesn't have to be that perfect-looking end product to send out to media," Gray explains. "Our social team will go out with an iPhone and get stuff."

The Power of Multimedia

In today's visual media landscape, compelling images and videos are essential. "Photos and videos tell the stories," Gray emphasizes. "If you get a video of any animal doing anything—even mildly entertaining or cute—people love it. People will share it."

Bryner suggests focusing on unique perspectives. "Prioritizing video assets that only you can obtain, like aerial perspectives or on-ride POV video can be most effective," she notes. "Sending drone b-roll alerts has increased our regional coverage substantially."


Beyond the Kit: Building Media Relationships

A great press kit is just the start—lasting media coverage depends on genuine relationships. As Bogaard notes, "Our relationship with the media needs to be nurtured, maintained, and approached with genuine value."

Gray agrees, saying, "It's old school, but there's still relationship-building in the media world ... reaching out to individuals when you have a story with, 'Hey, John, I thought of you for that neat thing we have going on,'" she recommends.

Actionable Steps

An effective press kit is your ticket to greater visibility, stronger media relationships, and increased coverage you couldn't otherwise afford. Start by auditing your current media materials, update the essentials, and lean into creative storytelling that sets your attraction apart.

"At the end of the day, your goal is to give them something so compelling—and so well packaged—that they simply can't say no," emphasized Bogaard. 



Lisa Beach is an Orlando-based freelance journalist, copywriter, and content marketing writer. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Conde Nast Traveler, Hotel Management, Good Housekeeping, USA Today, Success, and dozens more. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



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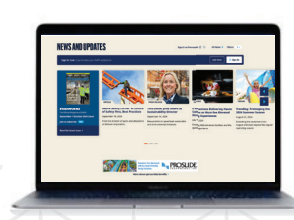
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Try, Learn, and Adapt with Transparency

Insight into IAAPA Honors' evolution

In late April, we hosted the second edition of IAAPA Honors—this time at the wonderful Europa-Park Resort-Park in Germany.

IAAPA Honors debuted in 2024 following the guiding principles that the association drafted in partnership with the IAAPA Awards Committee and the Global Board of Directors. The goal: create a dedicated event where we truly focus on the IAAPA Brass Ring Award and Individual Award winners. An event of this nature allows winners to tell their stories, inspire attendees, and celebrate excellence on a global scale. As is often the case when you launch something new: some things work ... others do not.

After the inaugural event premiered in Las Vegas in winter 2024, the IAAPA Team—in close collaboration with the Awards Committee and IAAPA Board of Directors—refined the concept based on what went well and what didn't. We try and adapt! Over 11 months, a revised concept evolved for the event's sophomore year that included:

- Bringing IAAPA Honors to a region beyond North America to best reflect our global membership and industry
- Staging the event at a leading attraction, where attendees could learn from the host attraction and their commitment to excellence, while staying connected to our award categories
- Placing a greater focus on the “why” behind each finalist and winner, explaining the commitment behind their achievement
- Enhancing the educational component through inspiring keynote speakers and revealing behind-the-scenes tours
- And of course—celebrating in style

This journey consisted of in-depth conversation and healthy debates internally and with the committees and



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the Board. In the end, we delivered on most of our ambitions.

Over three days this spring in Germany, participants experienced one of the world's top theme parks, learned from the incredibly hospitable Mack family and team, became inspired by award finalists and winners, heard powerful insights from a diverse range of speakers, and—most importantly—had fun together. We increased the net promoter score from the 2024 event to IAAPA Honors 2025 by 60 points. (NPS is a customer experience metric used to measure loyalty and satisfaction.) IAAPA Honors 2025 will long be remembered as a week full of meaningful connections and unforgettable moments.

One of the most celebrated moments occurred right at the beginning, when we discovered more than 10 past IAAPA chairmen in the audience and assembled them together on stage. IAAPA is pleased to still welcome such large number of these dedicated members to an event like IAAPA Honors. This shows the ongoing commitment and dedication of our endearing volunteers who have invested so much time to this association. And for that, I offer a warm “thank you.”

But we're not done. We will continue to work with all of you, our committees, and our members to deliver relevant experiences. And we will, as always, do our very best to improve further. I look forward to sharing the details of IAAPA Honors 2026 ... soon. You won't want to miss what's next. **FW**



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TOP CENTER: Past IAAPA Chairmen gather at IAAPA Honors.

SECOND DOWN: Frederik Mack and Miriam Mack pose with their IAAPA Brass Ring Awards.

THIRD DOWN: Facility operators and owners tour the Mack Rides factory.

ABOVE: 2025 IAAPA Chairman of the Board Massimiliano Freddi presents Roland Mack with the commemorative 40th anniversary edition of Funworld.

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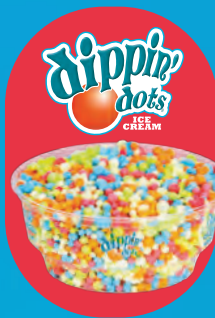
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