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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

# Funworld

# Plopsa's New Chapter

CEO Carl Lenaerts aims to build a values-led family theme park business that forges emotional connections

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KRIS VAN DE SANDE

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# Plopsa's New Chapter

CEO Carl Lenaerts aims to build a values-led family theme park business that forges emotional connections

COVER PHOTO: KRIS VAN DE SANDE

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LAYERED REALITY


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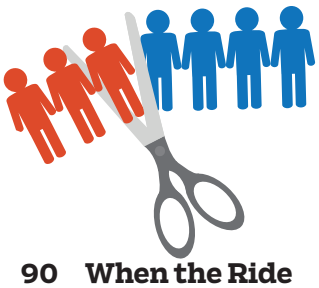

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## Rope Drop

### AlpenFury Blazes Across the Canadian Sky

An engineering marvel, the new AlpenFury roller coaster at Canada's Wonderland launches riders vertically out of the top of the park's existing Wonder Mountain. Standing 50 meters tall, AlpenFury features two launches, nine inversions, and races at speeds of 115 km/h. Following a structural analysis, the ride's trains are designed to look like sleds. "The team at Canada's Wonderland is known to build anything, and they are very creative. It's a joy to work with people like that," says Jim Seay, president of Premier Rides.

Fans of the new coaster have written songs about AlpenFury and created Instagram accounts celebrating the ride. Watch Funworld's report from Toronto here.


**Funworld Magazine Team**

**Senior Director, Global Editorial and Digital Content**
Scott Fais
*SFais@IAAPA.org*

**Managing Editor, Funworld Magazine**
Michael Costello
*MCostello@IAAPA.org*

**Associate Editor, Funworld Magazine**
Avery Matteo
*AMatteo@IAAPA.org*

**Contributing Editor**
Juliana Gilling
*julianagilling@gmail.com*

**Manager, Global Advertising and Sales**
Kelsey O'Hearne Bohl
*KBohl@IAAPA.org*

**Production Manager**
Michelle Wandres
*MWandres@IAAPA.org*

**Contact us for advertising info at +1 321-319-7682 or email at Advertising@IAAPA.org**

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Rob McNicholas



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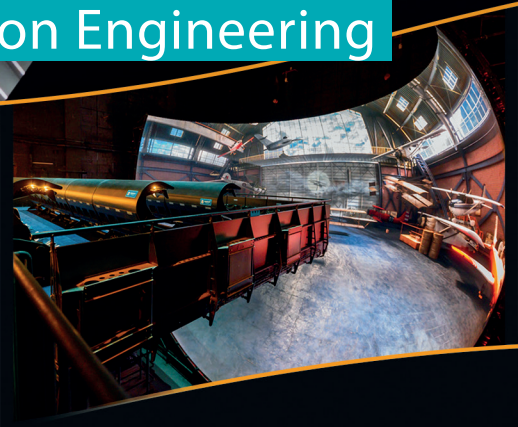

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for permanent show
«CineSational», Universal Studios, Orlando, FL, USA.

Photo credits : Frank Baudy / Universal Studios

Audience members experience the new Elvis Evolution immersive experience while the star's image is projected onto the stage's backdrop.

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

# Elvis is (Almost) in the Building

## All shook up at London's Elvis Evolution experience

*by Juliana Gilling*

PICTURE THE SCENE: IT'S 1968 AND ELVIS PRESLEY IS ABOUT TO RECORD his long-awaited Comeback Special for NBC Studios in Burbank, California. But the show hangs in the balance. Gripped by stage fright, Elvis nearly misses delivering one of television's most iconic music performances. That's the moment the new Elvis Evolution immersive experience in London hooks audiences into the King of Rock 'n' Roll's story.

Audience members find themselves transported back in time to Bob's Burbank Diner across the street from NBC Studios. Just like the patrons at 1960s diners that Elvis' manager, Colonel Parker, recruited to make up the crowd for the TV special, today's guests become the studio audience for the show. The backstage drama is the jumping-off point for a two-hour theatrical journey through Elvis' life, music, and legacy. Elvis Evolution recreates pivotal moments from the star's life, from his Mississippi childhood to his early days at Sun Records in Memphis, his meteoric rise to fame, and his legendary Las Vegas residency.

"We wanted to create a joyful celebration of Elvis's life," says Andrew McGuinness, CEO of Layered Reality. The British immersive entertainment company secured the global rights to debut the show in London in July, with →

LAYERED REALITY

the support of Authentic Brands Group, owners of the Elvis Presley estate, and Elvis Presley Enterprises.

Elvis Evolution combines storytelling, live actors and musicians, physical sets, immersive visuals, and special effects to deliver a multisensory promenade experience. The show's January 2024 announcement mentioned a life-sized digital Elvis and holographic projections. However, ultimately, the team featured archival recordings and "unshot footage"—footage generated by artificial intelligence based on actual events. Elvis' greatest hits provide the toe-tapping, hip-swiveling soundtrack.

Elvis Presley is one of the most closely protected intellectual properties in entertainment, so recreating his defining years was "an incredible opportunity" and a challenge, according to McGuinness. "Demonstrating our worthiness was the first hurdle," he says. Layered Reality had a proven track record with London's longest-running immersive show, Jeff Wayne's The War of The Worlds: The Immersive Experience. "We've learned an enormous amount from the rights-holders," McGuinness adds.

To create an authentic portrayal of Elvis, Layered Reality's team conducted extensive research, accessing thousands of his personal photos and home videos. "We are very respectful of Elvis and his legacy," McGuinness says. "Having a compelling story" was vital. The story, not the technology, takes center stage at Elvis Evolution.

The 33,000-square-foot facility is in London's newest entertainment district, Immerse LDN at the Excel London Waterfront in London's Royal Docks (the same location of IAAPA Expo Europe 2026, taking place Sept. 21-24, 2026). Elvis Evolution differs from concert-style shows like ABBA Voyage (with its 3,000-person capacity arena). "We've learned over the years that people want to come when they want to come, not necessarily when you put your show on," McGuinness explains. Elvis Evolution offers multiple performances daily from Wednesday to Sunday, cycling groups of 160 people.

"Our shows are much more intimate," McGuinness says. For example, in Elvis' reconstructed dressing room at NBC Studios, the star's specially recreated scent still lingers—as if he had just stepped out. "You are getting very close to Elvis in a way that's never been possible before," McGuinness says.

Elvis Evolution features seven scenes, a retro-themed diner, a "Blue Hawaii" tiki bar, and an "All Shook Up" after-party live music venue where guests can hang out, drink, and dance.

Tickets for Elvis Evolution are on sale until December 2025, although there are hopes it could become a permanent attraction. "We'll have to wait and see," McGuinness says. Prices start from £68; there are also two more expensive VIP packages available.

Elvis has always had universal reach, and McGuinness sees the potential for Elvis Evolution in cities worldwide. In Elvis' immortal words, "Let's rock, everybody, let's rock." FW

*elvisevolution.com*

**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**:

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## 1 CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY
# TYPHOON TEXAS GENERATES GOOD

**Typhoon Texas** water park launched a donation drive for families in need following the devastating floods in central Texas responsible for more than 135 fatalities. Generous families visited the water park to drop off storage boxes, hygiene products, diapers, paper towels, cleaning supplies, and bottled water. The park collected more than $300,000 worth of essential supplies in four days.

TYPHOON TEXAS

As a special thank you, Typhoon Texas gave those who contributed items valued at $50 or more a free day pass.

"Of all the disasters we've faced along the Texas Gulf Coast, this one struck particularly close to home. The impact on Texas families was personal—and it showed in how our guests and neighbors stepped up to help," says John Pham, vice president of marketing for Houston-based **Pyek Group**, operator of the Typhoon Texas water parks in Houston and Austin.

## 2 RIBBON CUTTINGS

### SINGAPORE'S SPLASH

**The Singapore Oceanarium** (formerly SEA Aquarium) celebrated its grand opening in late July. The reimagined facility at **Resorts World Sentosa** now features more than 40,000 marine animals. "From walking alongside our aquarists and witnessing marine animal care in action, to engaging with marine scientists through hands-on workshops, every experience offers a deeper understanding of our oceans," says Vice President Lam Xue Ying.

RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA

### SÃO PAULO'S NEW TASTE

São Paulo's new **Afrika Park** is more than a restaurant: it's an immersive attraction transporting families to the African savannah. The indoor park fuses theming with creative gastronomy. Between bites, children can connect with walkaround characters, play games, and participate in activities. Targeting kids age 11 and under, Afrika Park also features birthday party rooms and retail space.

AFRIKA PARK

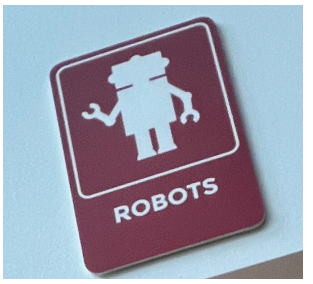
### DOLLYWOOD ABLAZE AGAIN

They're shouting "Fire in the Hole!" again at **Dollywood**. Park President Eugene Naughton and Pigeon Forge Fire Department Chief Tony Watson cut the ribbon, officially rededicating the park's oldest roller coaster, **Blazing Fury**. Enhancements include new costumes for characters, updated signage, track work, and the waterfall area receiving a complete rebuild. Firefighters and their families were the first to ride.

DOLLYWOOD

## 3 OFFICE LIFE
# WORKPLACE FUN

Even robots gotta go. For animated figure developer **Sally Dark Rides**, adding a "restroom" for robots is a regular reminder to keep the creativity flowing. As purveyors of fun, the company's Jacksonville, Florida, factory features a miniature door next to the real water closets. When the small door is touched, a robotic voice chirps humorous phrases from inside, such as "Warning! Toxin level high!" Sally's employees were encouraged to submit bathroom-related quips that rotate each time the door handle is pulled.




SCOTT FAIS

## 4 PARK OPERATIONS
# STUFFING BOX

Will it fit? Guests at **Dorney Park** in Allentown, Pennsylvania, can quickly determine if they will need a locker for bags and backpacks. Several ride entrances feature a box where riders can test the size of their articles. If the bag fits, guests may stow it on the coaster platform. If not, their articles will need to be placed in a locker or left with a non-rider.

SCOTT FAIS

## 5 MILESTONES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS
# GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY: EUROPA-PARK AT 50

This year marks 50 years since Franz Mack, along with his son Roland, opened **Europa-Park** in Rust, Germany. What began with skepticism from local residents and the press has since grown into one of the largest family-owned theme parks in the world. During the resort's anniversary gala in July, several IAAPA Chairmen of the Board and IAAPA CEO Jakob Wahl joined Dr. Roland Mack to celebrate the milestone. Pictured left to right: Wahl, Amanda Thompson OBE, Chip Cleary, Dr. Roland Mack, Massimiliano Freddi, Mario Mamon, and Andreas Andersen (not pictured, IAAPA EMEA Chairman Håkon Lund, and IAAPA EMEA Executive Director and Vice President Peter van der Schans who were also in attendance). *Read more about Europa-Park's phenomenal growth story on page 84.*

EUROPA-PARK

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LEGOLAND SHANGHAI RESORT

# Legoland Shanghai Resort Opens with Grand Celebration

Brick by brick, Legoland Shanghai Resort officially opened its gates on July 5, marking the debut of the Lego brand's first theme park in China. Located in Fengjing Town, Jinshan District, the 318,000-square-meter park features more than 75 interactive rides, shows, and attractions across eight themed lands.

Merlin Entertainments CEO Fiona Eastwood calls the park "a testament to the dedication of our teams" in a press release, noting it blends global Lego storytelling with Chinese cultural elements. Lego Group CEO Niels B. Christiansen adds that the resort will become "a new cultural landmark for family interaction."

Highlights include the world premiere of the Lego Monkie Kid live show, a water-town boat ride, and Asia's largest Lego retail shop. The resort also played host to an EDUTour during IAAPA Expo Asia 2025 just before the attraction's grand debut.

*legolandshanghai.cn*

# South Korea's Gyeongju World Debuts Time Rider Coaster Wheel

It's a Ferris wheel and roller coaster combined. This summer, Gyeongju World in South Korea opened Time Rider, a coaster wheel developed by Intamin to mark the park's 40th anniversary. The 51-meter-tall attraction combines scenic observation with thrill ride elements, offering two distinct experiences through fixed and mobile gondolas.

Unlike a traditional giant wheel, Time Rider's mobile gondolas move along a curved track—like a roller coaster—as the wheel rotates, creating a swinging sensation. The attraction captures the attention of visitors upon their arrival, enhanced by custom LED lighting and immersive theming.

The ride serves as the park's new visual anchor, blending aesthetics with engineering to create a signature experience. In a press release, Intamin congratulated Gyeongju World and shared appreciation for the continued partnership, stating the company is "honored to be part of this celebration."

*intamin.com*

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# Four-Legged Fun at Bellewaerde Park in Belgium

There was tail-wagging, belly rubbing, puppy splashing, and treat grabbing galore at Bellewaerde this summer as the Belgian theme park opened its doors to families' furry best friends. Bellewaerde's first-ever Dog Days event welcomed more than 750 dogs—and their owners—across five days in July.

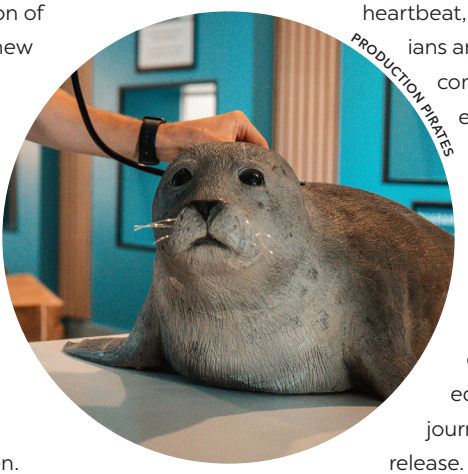
Dog Days aligned perfectly with the park's mission. "Bellewaerde Park aims to offer fun and adventure in a natural setting where family and friends can experience authentic and unforgettable moments together. We focus on families with kids, and they see their dogs not just as pets, but as family members," says Charlotte Looten, operations director at Bellewaerde.

Pooches could look forward to dog-friendly activities including paddling, treibball (herding giant balls), agility classes, and pampering sessions. Police dogs showed off their prowess in demonstrations. Retail stands offered snacks, toys, and dog accessories. The park provided swimming pools for dogs, an ice bar, and kennels for when pet owners wanted to go on the attractions. Fewer kennels were required than anticipated, according to Looten, because people preferred to keep their pets with them. "Visitors were there to enjoy quality time with their dogs," she says.

Bellewaerde Park is likely to bring Dog Days back once it settles on the best time to host the event. "We had a lot of positive feedback," Looten says.

# Seal of Approval for Sea Life Blankenberge Makeover

Sea Life Blankenberge celebrated its mission of conservation and education by breathing new life into its seal hospital—the heart and soul of the facility—for its 30th birthday this year. Since 1998, the Belgian seal sanctuary has rescued, rehabilitated, and released more than 615 seals. "We wanted to refresh the visitor experience and tell our story more powerfully than ever before," says Tom Vandenbroucke, guest experience manager at Sea Life Blankenberge.



PRODUCTION PIRATES

The new Seal Hospital is designed to engage the whole family, especially children.

"Visitors can immerse themselves in the day-to-day work of our animal carers and rescuers: They can touch, observe, and truly experience every stage of the seal rescue journey," Vandenbroucke says. "Guests can listen to a pup's heartbeat, children can play at being veterinarians and care for a toy seal, step on a scale to compare their weight with a seal pup, and explore hands-on interactive exhibits."

Documentary footage of real-life rescues and releases gives guests a front-row seat to the seal sanctuary's life-saving work. Large viewing windows allow visitors to watch rescued pups resting in quarantine, receiving exams and professional care. Multilingual educational panels describe the seal's journey from stranding to rehabilitation and release.

The reimagined Seal Hospital is the flagship of several overhauls during Sea Life Blankenberge's anniversary year, that include a revamped Virtual Aquarium and upcoming VR underwater experience.

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GROUND CONTROL ENTERTAINMENT CO.

# FEC Operator Ground Control Expands Mission

Five new FECs are headed to the Middle East and northern Africa. "Ground Control Entertainment Co.'s core vision is to be a prominent innovator in the entertainment sector," says founder and CEO Mohamed Mahmoud. The company operates a portfolio of entertainment brands and is expanding its Ground Control family entertainment centers with new openings at Dubai Festival City Mall and Reem Mall in Abu Dhabi.

"These expansions will bring the total number of countries with Ground Control locations to five, including Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (with two locations in Dubai and one in Abu Dhabi), and Egypt (three branches). The company continues to explore further expansion opportunities," Mahmoud says.

He says the company will strategically expand into new markets, integrate advanced technologies into its offerings, and focus on exceptional customer service to build loyalty.

The goal is to create high-quality, interactive attractions that foster community and shared enjoyment. Sustainability initiatives underpin that work. Diversifying into related sectors, such as esports arenas, is also a possibility, according to Mahmoud.

*groundcontrolsocial.com*

# Louvre Abu Dhabi Announces New Exhibitions

Art and history are on exhibit in the United Arab Emirates. Louvre Abu Dhabi is enticing visitors with three new flagship exhibitions. First up is Mamluks: Legacy of an Empire, taking place Sept. 17 to Jan. 25, 2026. The exhibit is organized in partnership with Musée du Louvre and France Muséums. The exhibition illuminates the powerful Mamluk dynasty, which ruled over vast territories from 1250 to 1517.

From Oct. 8 to Dec. 28, 2025, Art Here 2025 and the Richard Mille Art Prize will feature the works of contemporary artists based in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Japan, and the Middle East and North Africa region.

Kicking off the New Year is Picasso, the Figure, in partnership with Musée National Picasso-Paris and France Muséums, taking place Jan. 21 to May 31, 2026.

"Louvre Abu Dhabi's exhibitions embody our commitment to offering visitors enriching and inspiring experiences," says Manuel Rabaté, director of Louvre Abu Dhabi. "We are proud to present a compelling dialogue between Eastern and Western artistic traditions, showcasing masterpieces that celebrate cultural heritage and innovation."

*louvreabudhabi.ae*

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND TOURISM – ABU DHABI

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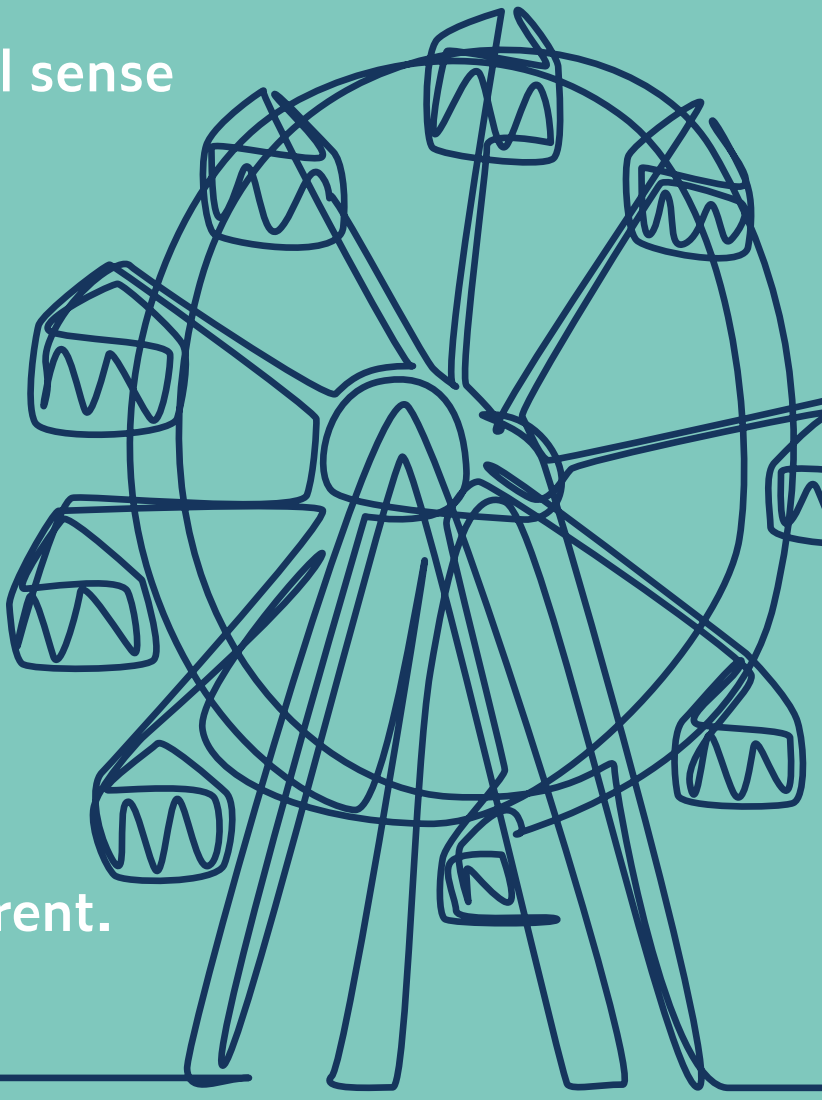

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ACTIVATE

# Activate Partners with Enigma Rooms in Mexico

Player up. Canadian-based active gaming company Activate plans to expand into Mexico through a strategic partnership with Enigma Rooms, one of Latin America's largest escape room operators. The collaboration brings together two entertainment brands known for creating interactive, tech-driven experiences and marks Activate's first move into the Latin American market.

Activate offers full-body gaming experiences that combine digital and physical play. Its technology invites guests to move, think, and collaborate through a series of high-energy game rooms. "Partnering with Enigma Rooms allows us to bring this vision to Mexico in a way that will transform the entertainment landscape," says Activate Founder and CEO Adam Schmidt.

Enigma Rooms, launched in 2014, operates 26 locations with 117 escape rooms across Mexico. The company has collaborated with global brands including Netflix, Disney, and Marvel Studios.

*playactivate.com, enigmarooms.net*

# Colombia Advances Grand Boardwalk Project

Enhanced accessibility is at the heart of new development in Cartagena, Colombia. Construction is underway on the Gran Malecón del Mar, a large-scale infrastructure initiative, that includes a new observation wheel as an attraction. The project is designed to revitalize the coastline by restoring beaches, expanding public space, improving accessibility, and generating jobs.

The first phase spans five kilometers, connecting the seaside community of La Boquilla to Cartagena's Historic Center via a pedestrian-friendly corridor along the Caribbean Sea. Daily traffic is projected at 25,000 visitors, with long-term goals including enhanced accessibility for children, seniors, and people with disabilities.

According to city estimates, the project will attract more than 576,000 visitors annually. "This mega-project will change the tourism landscape of Cartagena," says Mayor Dumek Turbay Paz. "It will feature pedestrian zones, bike lanes, public plazas, retail areas, and essential services."

Led by Consorcio Gran Malecón del Mar, the project will also introduce Mirador del Sol, a seafront park space anchored by a Ferris wheel inspired by observation wheels in world capital cities. Additional features include 59,000 square meters of green space, more than 3,700 meters of bike lanes, and a visitor information center. The initiative is expected to support job creation and boost local economic development.

*cartagenadeindias.travel*

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# Environmental Art Center Opens Adjacent to Australia's Grampians National Park

A new attraction in Australia celebrates art where nature and science come together. Australia's first National Centre for Environmental Art officially opened in July at Pomonal, Victoria, adjacent to the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park. Operated by the Wama Foundation, the immersive space combines a contemporary gallery with native botanic gardens, integrating art, science, and ecology across 16 hectares.

Chief Executive Pippa Mott describes the gallery as "a community hub where we can celebrate our nature together." The opening exhibition, titled End & Being by Jacobus Capone, features performance art recorded on the glaciers of Mont Blanc and explores themes of climate change.

The gardens house 500 native species—many endemic to the Grampians—and function as a seed bank to aid future restoration efforts. Privately funded and not-for-profit, the center is seeking continued philanthropic and volunteer support to expand future programming and visitor offerings.

*wamafoundation.com.au/*

# Auckland Zoo Welcomes Kangaroos to Australia Bush Track

Cool and calm. That's how Auckland Zoo recently welcomed several forester kangaroos—a subspecies of the eastern grey kangaroo—to its Australia Bush Track exhibit. Native to Tasmania, the kangaroos are known for their calm nature and settled into their new habitat under close observation by animal care staff.

As part of the introduction process, the zoo closed a section of the exhibit—including areas housing emus, brolgas, and Cunningham's skinks—to ensure a smooth transition. To avoid disappointment from guests, the zoo proactively shared with guests that sightings may be limited during the transition period, as the kangaroos acclimate to their new environment and routine.

This addition marks another step in Auckland Zoo's efforts to expand and enrich its Australian species exhibits.

*aucklandzoo.co.nz*

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LAMBTON HERITAGE MUSEUM

# Food Safety to Take Center Stage at Canada's Lambton Heritage Museum

The age-old dinnertime battle cry of "Don't play with your food" will become a thing of the past at the Lambton Heritage Museum in Grand Bend, Ontario, Canada. The facility's new exhibit, A Taste of Science—set to open in October—offers a hands-on opportunity for visitors to learn about innovations used to keep food fresh and safe to eat.

"A Taste of Science helps visitors learn with engaging elements," says Dana Thorne, curator/supervisor of the Lambton Heritage Museum. "There's an area where you push a button, and the scent of a spoiling food blows toward your nose. It sounds gross, but kids just love guessing which food matches which yucky smell!"

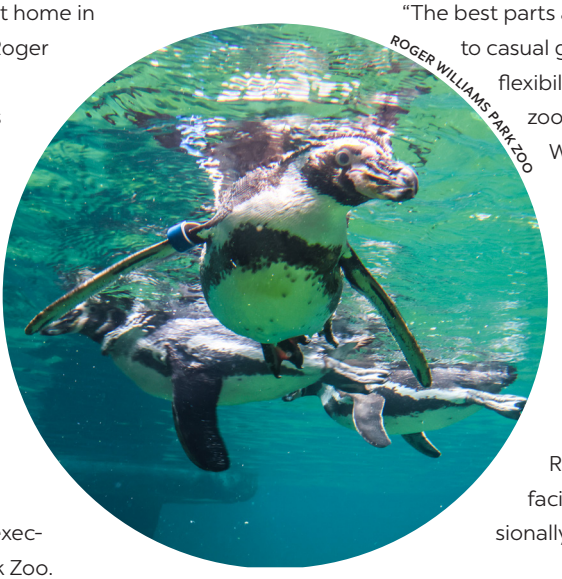
The bilingual, all-ages exhibit is a hands-on opportunity for visitors was first developed by the Canada Agriculture and Food Museum to teach guests about the science of food safety.

*lambtonmuseums.ca*

# Penguins Dive Into Rhode Island's Roger Williams Park Zoo

Humboldt penguins are now right at home in Providence, Rhode Island. In June, Roger Williams Park Zoo opened its new Penguin Point exhibit. The habitat is built for Humboldt penguins, which originate from the rocky shores of Chile and Peru—giving guests the opportunity to witness their natural behaviors on land and underwater.

"It is a delightful experience to observe these birds through an underwater window as they transform from awkward beach dwellers into graceful fliers beneath the surface," says Stacey Johnson, executive director of Roger Williams Park Zoo.




"The best parts about the remodeling are invisible to casual guests. Space, efficiency, quality, and flexibility in off-exhibit animal space and zookeeper work areas will empower Roger Williams Park Zoo to provide excellent care and actively participate in the cooperative management program for Humboldt penguins."

Humboldt penguins are considered "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as their natural population continues to decline. Roger Williams Park Zoo joins 23 other facilities in North America who professionally care for Humboldt penguins.

*rwpzoo.org/*

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SANDENBURG-DST AND METACORP

# Immersive Beer Experience to Open at Aruba's Gloria Complex

Here's one to toast: a new brand attraction dedicated to Aruba's Balashi beer is set to open in 2026 at the Gloria entertainment complex in Oranjestad.

The project, led by MetaCorp—Aruba's oldest company and owner of both the Gloria complex and the Balashi brand—aims to diversify Aruba's tourism by offering an experience for vacationers, cruise passengers, and local residents.

Amsterdam-based Sandenburg-DST is designing the experience. "We're not creating a traditional beer museum," says CEO Markus Konings. "This will be an immersive and captivating experience that tells the story of Balashi while embedding visitors in the unique sense of place that is Aruba."

The attraction will span approximately 1,300 square meters and feature a walkthrough exhibit with nine themed scenes. Visitors will explore stories through film, scenography, music, special effects, exhibits, and games. The journey will culminate in a tasting, followed by a competitive socializing zone, a themed bar, and a retail space.

*balashibrewery.com*

# New Gallery in Nigeria Will Host Repatriated Art

It's a homecoming in Nigeria. Coronation Group has partnered with Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) to establish a gallery set to house 119 repatriated Benin Bronzes in Benin City. The works, recently returned from the Netherlands, represent the largest single repatriation of these artifacts since they were taken during the British punitive expedition of 1897.

The Coronation Gallery will be located within the new NCMM Oba Ovonramwen Facility in Benin City and is expected to open to the public later this year. Designed as a space for conservation, education, and engagement, the gallery aims to ensure the long-term preservation and meaningful display of the bronzes for future generations.

"These works represent the depth of our heritage and the strength of our collective identity," says Coronation Group Chairman Aigboje Aig-Imoukhuede. "We are proud to support their safe return and public preservation, ensuring they inspire future generations and help shape a stronger cultural future for Africa."

In partnership with Tate, the company is also supporting Nigerian Modernism, the first exhibition in the United Kingdom to trace the development of modern art in Nigeria.

*museum.ng*

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## IAAPA Welcomes New Vice President and Executive Director for North America

IAAPA

Rob McNicholas

**Rob McNicholas** is **IAAPA**'s new vice president and executive director for North America. With more than two decades of experience in the global attractions industry, McNicholas brings deep expertise. He was formerly corporate vice president of operations at United Parks & Resorts. "I am beyond thrilled to join IAAPA and to support a team that's just as passionate about this industry as our members are," he says.

McNicholas has come full circle. "Many of us can point to their aha moment. For me, that was the 2004 IAAPA Expo. I was a Show Ambassador, and I can still remember seeing the show floor for the first time. I knew right then this was the industry I wanted to be a part of."

IAAPA is needed more than ever, McNicholas believes. "Our industry is changing fast. Guest expectations, new technology like artificial intelligence, and workforce challenges are all reshaping how we operate. IAAPA brings members together. Through advocacy, education, and connection, we help the industry stay informed, supported, and ready for what's next."

## Erin Walsh Joins IAAPA as Vice President of Global Membership, Marketing, and Communications

ERIN WALSH

Erin Walsh

**Erin Walsh** brings more 20 years of experience in association management—with a strong focus on membership engagement and community connections—as **IAAPA**'s new vice president of Global Membership, Marketing, and Communications.

"I am thrilled to join IAAPA and begin relationship building with our members, while sharing my passion for learning," she says. With a reputation for quality and excellence, Walsh believes in approaching each challenge with focus, heart, and a collaborative spirit. "I was drawn to the field of membership, marketing, and communication because it lives at the intersection of people, purpose, and connection."

Most recently, Walsh served as the senior vice president of membership and industry relations at the Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association (CFHLA).

## Tracy Klein Steers North American Sales at Adirondack Studios

ADIRONDACK STUDIOS

Tracy Klein

Attractions industry veteran **Tracy Klein** has joined **Adirondack Studios** as director of sales for North America. During a career spanning almost 30 years, Klein has played a pivotal role in the development, launch, and success of location-based entertainment (LBE) projects for leading intellectual property holders. She has used her business development and sales acumen to build relationships between internal and external teams working on LBEs, themed entertainment, technical multimedia, special effects, show action equipment, and fabrication.

Klein will develop and implement the company's sales strategy and guide the business development, sales, and estimation team at Adirondack Studios, which specializes in scenic design, fabrication, and installation solutions.

## Game of Thrones Studio Tour Strengthens Leadership

GAME OF THRONES STUDIO TOUR

Mark Woolner, Sam Harding, and Dan Kenwright

**The Game of Thrones Experience** in Banbridge, Northern Ireland, has welcomed two new power players to its court. **Dan Kenwright** joins as head of operations, and **Mark Woolner** as head of sales and marketing. Both leaders bring expertise in hospitality, strategic planning, and commercial growth.

"The Studio Tour is a truly impressive experience," Kenwright says. "My focus is on delivering a high-quality, seamless operation that reflects the scale and care behind the original production, and makes every visitor feel part of something remarkable."

Woolner is "looking forward to building campaigns that reach beyond the fanbase, invite new audiences in, and position the Studio Tour as a must-see destination, and a world-class experience for our visitors."

Their appointments highlight the Studio Tour's strategy to broaden its reach, elevate the visitor experience, and establish the site as a cultural landmark for the region.

## Exciting New Chapter for Storyland Studios

STORYLAND STUDIOS

Ben Thompson

There are changes afoot at **Storyland Studios**, which imagines, designs, and creates uplifting immersive experiences and environments. **Ben Thompson** has started a new position as chief executive officer of Storyland Locations at Storyland Studios. **Tyler Thornberg**, who supported Thompson as executive director of project development, becomes vice president of business development at Storyland Studios.

STORYLAND STUDIOS

Tyler Thornberg

Thornberg has more than two decades of experience in the film, television, and themed entertainment industries. He will cultivate current business relationships while seeking new avenues of growth for the studio. "Our collective vision of 'creating stories that lift the spirit' allows us to explore new and exciting opportunities. It's a great challenge for me in this role to help us focus on the best paths to tread," Thornberg says.

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# In Memoriam

by Avery Matteo

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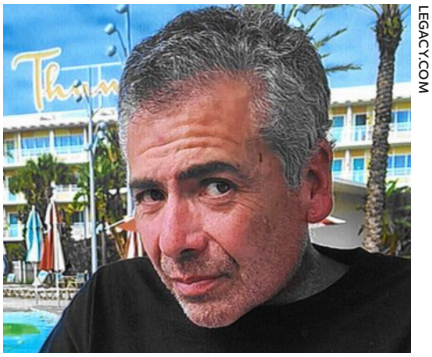

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## Norman Daniel Cork

**Norman Cork**, 79, was a longtime amusement operator and co-owner of **Lucy's Amusement Park** in Minot, North Dakota, which recently celebrated 57 years of continuous operation. Cork, a U.S. Air Force veteran, brought joy to generations of families through his hands-on dedication to park maintenance, construction projects, and guest service. Alongside his wife Lucy, he helped create a cherished local destination rooted in community and family.

## David Hoth

**David Hoth**, 56, brought passion and creativity to his work at **Bertch Cabinets** and **Lost Island Theme Park** in Waterloo, Iowa, where he earned deep respect for his leadership and camaraderie. Outside of work, he and his wife Kathy became fierce advocates for cancer research, demonstrating his compassion and perseverance. Hoth's memory endures in the community he supported, the colleagues he inspired, and the joy he helped create at Lost Island.

## Reginald Moultrie

**Reggie Moultrie** passed away at age 69 on June 18. A respected industry veteran, he held key leadership roles at **Skee-Ball**, **Dave & Buster's**, and **Six Flags Great Adventure** before founding his own consulting firm, Moute Point, Inc. For more than two decades, Moultrie's strategic insight helped shape and grow the attractions industry, offering guidance to manufacturers, operators, and developers alike. Known for his presence at events such as IAAPA Expo, Moultrie was deeply admired for his experience, mentorship, and warmth.



# What's New

by Avery Matteo

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LAI GAMES

## Chance Rides Debuts All-Electric eTram

**Chance Rides** introduces the **eTram**, an all-electric mobility solution developed in partnership with Sweden's EVX Mobility. Engineered for performance, sustainability, and comfort, the eTRAM seats 24 passengers, tackles 14% grades, and operates reliably in temperatures as low as 5°F. With solar assisted charging up to 80% and intelligent fleet management, eTram offers maximum range with minimal grid reliance. Multiple configurations and a tight 15-foot turning radius make it ideal for resorts, campuses, and urban environments.

*chancerides.com*

## LAI Games Expands Reach with Galaxy Hunter and Kaiju Rampage

**LAI Games** announced the nationwide rollout of two top-performing titles—**Galaxy Hunter** and **Kaiju Rampage**—to **Round1 Bowling & Arcade** locations across the U.S. Galaxy Hunter, a hybrid coin pusher and video game, will be available at all venues, while the high-intensity Kaiju Rampage will launch in 22 locations. With immersive features such as motion platforms and 4K visuals, both games are designed to captivate guests and drive revenue.

*laigames.com*

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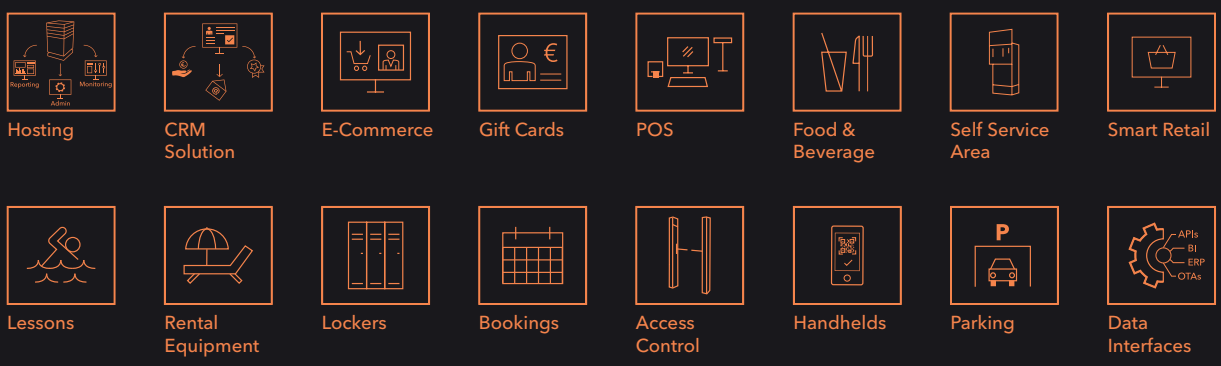


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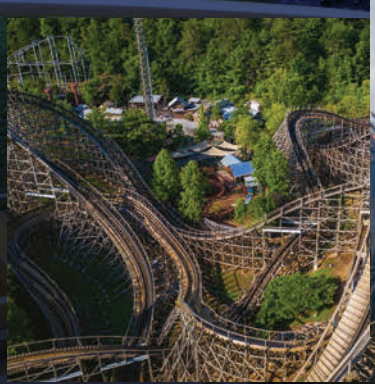

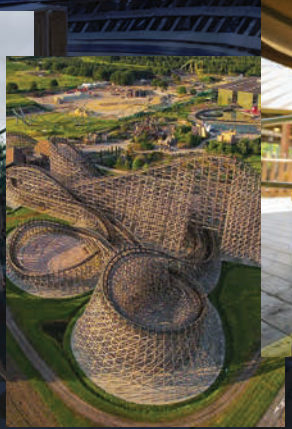

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*by Arthur Levine*

# Adeleh Basiri: Iran's Theme Park Trailblazer

GROWING UP IN IRAN, Adeleh Basiri spent endless hours building treehouses and whole villages crafted out of Lego bricks. So, it was only natural that she later pursued an advanced degree in architectural studies. Her schooling led to work developing large-scale urban planning projects. When Basiri accepted a job at architectural company Sepidsazan, the firm's CEO told Basiri that they planned to build a theme park and that the then 28-year-old would be the project manager. Basiri let him know that she had no idea where to start.

"Well, no one in Iran really knows how to build one," she recalls her boss saying. While the country has amusement parks, few incorporate storytelling and themed design. "We have no choice. We'll figure it out ourselves," Basiri recalls hearing from her CEO.

And that's what Basiri did. She and her team dove into research, learning all they could about how to create a world-class park. Due to changes in the governmental agencies that commissioned the project, it was eventually halted. However, this didn't stop Basiri, as she had already embraced her new career path in themed entertainment.

The budding attraction designer was delighted to learn that another company, Parsis Zarmehr Kish, was also charged with developing a theme park in Iran as part of a larger resort on Kish Island, a popular vacation spot. Basiri, who had become Sepidsazan's acting CEO, pitched her company to consult on the park. While they didn't reach an agreement, Basiri was offered a position to lead the project's design team by Mostafa Ziaratnia, Parsis Zarmehr Kish's deputy CEO and the park's visionary.

"The central narrative revolves around a group of pirates that, through a magical transformation, have turned into pirate cats," Basiri explains. At the park's center will be a castle housing a dark ride that tells the origin story of the feline buccaneers. "The entire park is envisioned as one cohesive land with a unified identity populated by characters who live in different neighborhoods, each with its own unique culture and personality," she adds.

ADELEH BASIRI

There will be indoor and outdoor areas totaling 40,000 square meters. Plans call for 12 attractions in total. (Interestingly, one of them will be bumper cars, which are wildly popular in Iran and draw crowds of spectators as well as riders.) Basiri and her team finished the design phase of the Kish theme park earlier this year, and it is now under construction. Its primary audience will be the 90 million people who live in Iran and are increasingly seeking leisure experiences.

I asked Basiri if it is unusual for a woman, especially one as young as her, to direct such a high-profile project in her country.

"Female managers are still quite rare, particularly in the entertainment and construction industries," she acknowledges. "I had to work hard to gain the trust of the organization and to lead my team, which consisted mostly of men. In general, I believe being a woman in a leadership role in the Middle East takes a certain kind of bravery."

Basiri says that she is proud to have helped developed Iran's first major theme park, which, she hopes, will spur additional development. With her work on the Kish project completed, she is seeking new opportunities both at home and abroad.

"My passion is the themed entertainment industry," says Basiri.

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

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*by Nick Dimatteo, CEO of Fortyfivegames*

# Bundling Gaming and Food

## Creating FEC packages that bring food and fun to the table

In entertainment venues, food and games are no longer separate silos. The smartest operators are bundling the bite with the beeps, using value driven packages that elevate the guest experience and increase visit frequency and spend.

When done right, this isn't just upselling, it creates memorable moments that satisfy both hunger and curiosity.

Here's the core truth: food often has tighter margins. Games, on the other hand, are more profitable and act as a magnet for engagement. When bundled thoughtfully, the profit margin on the whole experience rises, and so does customer satisfaction.

IAAPA NEWS

FEC visitors play close attention to rounds of pinball.

A package that might start with a $10 burger can evolve into a $25 per head visit when games are added in a strategic fashion.

To illustrate how this plays out, we will use the Grapevine, Texas, market as an example. With nearly 43% of households earning more than $100k and casual and fast-casual dining dominating the local scene, guests are accustomed to having options. Within a three-mile radius, there are more than 300 restaurants and a young, diverse population (median age: 33.6 years old) that values variety and experience.

This is where data driven decisions shine. Operators should use information already available to them as the starting point. For example, suppliers like US Foods, will often offer market reports free of charge. In fact, many larger food vendors will offer this market research at no charge—however operators need to ask for it.

For guests that are value conscious, consider offering a bundled games and food deal with a clear savings message. For example: "Get $10 in games when you buy any (burger, dinner, etc.)" will resonate. A premium pairing—such as artisan pizza and VR play—might perform better in a higher income area or pockets seeking experiences, like Grapevine, Texas.

But, how much game time do you give? That depends on what type of experience you want them to have. A quick visit? Add $5-$10 in gameplay. Looking to keep families onsite for 45 minutes or more? Build a $50+ package that stretches from lunch to leaderboard.

The nuance matters. Operators need to understand they are not feeding everyone with the same cookie cutter solution. This isn't a recycled promo pulled from a national binder—it's a custom value proposition influenced by actual guest demographics, spending patterns, and dining trends. That's how FEC operators earn profit and loyalty. And let's be honest, FEC operators want both.

Using local reports—like the Grapevine, Texas, data—can guide owners on what package to build. Savvy FEC owners know how many families live nearby; understand the income bands; restaurant density; and population age mix.

Look around: Ask if burger package joints and delivery chains are in the surrounding area. By leaning into the data that is already available and offering packages with a twist, operators can see greater returns.

Games drive energy. Food drives comfort. Together, they create a reason for guests to come back. The best strategy is not just blending food and fun; it's building a package that feels like it was made just for them … because it was.

**Nick Dimatteo's** background includes multi-unit leadership in F&B and amusement, with roles at K & Bahr Restaurant Grp, Namco, Tricorp, and Dave & Buster's. Now as CEO of Fortyfivegames and VP at Pinnacle Entertainment Group, he applies decades of operational and financial knowledge to help businesses. His focus on strategy, team development, and long-term profitability positions him as a trusted partner for emerging and established concepts. Connect with him on LinkedIn:

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*by Zachary Laks*

# Chaperone Policies: The Key to Ensuring a Pleasant Experience for All

## How leading attractions have successfully integrated guidelines

RECENT SHIFTS IN TEENAGE BEHAVIOR and guest conduct have ushered in a new era of strict chaperone policies, especially during evenings and weekends.

"We cannot legally be responsible for watching your children," says Kenneth Maguire, director of guest experience operations at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. "We have other jobs to do, and we have to tend to other guests. We don't have the staff availability or legal authority to watch your children and make decisions for them."

The driving force to implement policies follows a rise in unruly behavior—including fights, large groups of teens who loiter, and security incidents—most often emerging during evening or weekend spikes. Many policies were implemented or expanded after major incidences and disturbances.

Funworld looks at how several operators have drafted and evolved chaperone policies that may assist industry facilities looking to implement similar standards.

Two of the Six Flags-branded properties in Texas: Six Flags Over Texas and Six Flags Fiesta Texas, have recently implemented a new chaperone policy for guests 15 years and younger that requires minors to be accompanied by a chaperone who is 21 years or older after 4 p.m. The chaperone may accompany up to 10 guests, must present a valid government ID, and remain with their party while entering the park—and throughout the duration of their stay. Many of Six Flags parks chaperone guidelines note that the policy may be enforced earlier than 4 p.m. on days when crowd dynamics require it.

"When chaperones are there, they are the first step if there's something not going like it should," says Holly Williamson, a public affairs specialist at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

Knott's Berry Farm was one of one of the first parks to implement a wide-reaching chaperone policy in 2022 after an incident involving teenagers occurred inside the park. The park's policy has evolved and sets different guidelines on weekends. Monday through Thursday, guests ages 15 years old or younger must be accompanied by a chaperone who is at least 21 years old starting at 4 p.m. Friday through Sunday, minors entering after 1 p.m. require a chaperone. Knott's policy states the facility can adjust the times as needed at management's discretion based on crowd behavior.

SCOTT FAIS

Signage positioned just before the entry gate at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay in Florida displays the park's chaperone policy.

### Set Clear Age Limits

In discussions with multiple operators, clear age thresholds—commonly under 15—help in establishing clear delineations needed for a chaperone. LaQuita Ford, senior director of guest engagement at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, sheds light on the age, noting, "Typically, it's the ages of 16 to 17, when kids are able to legally drive where we will allow them into the museum without an adult."

### Establish Supervision Ratios and Guidelines

Most policies allow for up to 10 minors per adult chaperone. Attractions should detail and outline chaperone responsibilities—both from a supervision standpoint and an opportunistic standpoint—to set expectations early. This can be done with posts on social media channels, a proactive press release to spur coverage by local media outlets, printed leaflets handed to drivers at toll booths before guests park their vehicles, and signage at the front gate.

### Use Consistent Messaging

When building chaperone policies, attractions need to be transparent about why the rules exist, emphasizing safety and a positive guest experience. Ford at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry appreciates working with chaperones to "build out a really fun itinerary for the groups." She empowers the chaperones "to ensure that the kids are sticking to the itinerary" while following our policies and procedures. FW

**Zach Laks** is a travel writer and editor based in New York City with 10+ years of experience and bylines in 20 publications covering theme parks, cruises, resorts, and travel news. Connect with him on LinkedIn.

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*by Juliana Gilling*

# A Blueprint for Sustainable Stays

## Legoland Windsor's Woodland Village becomes model for green lodging

A YEAR AFTER ITS LAUNCH, Legoland Windsor Resort's Woodland Village in Englandis a model for sustainable accommodations across Legoland parks globally, according to Dare Ilori, group sustainability director at Merlin Entertainments and IAAPA EMEA Sustainability Committee member. The Legoland Woodland Village is Merlin's first operational carbon-neutral accommodation site. The £35 million United Kingdom-based park investment embodies Merlin's global ESG (environmental, social, and governance) strategy—to inspire people, care for the planet, and protect nature.

"We are delighted to have welcomed almost 100,000 guests to the Woodland Village since it opened. The feedback has been extremely positive," Ilori says. "By highlighting sustainable practices in action, the Woodland Village enhances the guest experience and educates visitors about the importance of conservation and sustainability. Guests are increasingly showing support for our carbon-neutral accommodation as visitor numbers increase."

Accommodations include 150 Lego-themed lodges (each sleeping up to five people) and budget-friendly camping barrels (each designed for four people) on the 10-acre site. At the Clubhouse Restaurant and Bar, families can dine, play with Lego toys, and enjoy entertainment. There are also outdoor play areas. An augmented reality experience invites children to become Junior Legoland Rangers and witness nature from their rooms.

Collaboration and employee support were crucial to the project's success. "We had a brilliant team on the ground and support from external partners to help us," Ilori says. The project team had to be flexible, incorporating technologies and sustainable elements developed after the 2017 planning application.

"Working with the Carbon Trust helped us reduce our carbon footprint at the resort and better understand and develop decarbonization strategies," he says. Carbon Trust is a global consultancy focused on accelerating the transition to a decarbonized future. "We now have a robust carbon reduction plan with the adoption of low-carbon technologies, energy efficiency, and high-quality offsets."

LEGOLAND WINDSOR RESORT

Legoland Windsor Resort's Woodland Village play area and accommodations.

To help secure BREEAM Certification (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) and strengthen the project's sustainable credentials, the team repurposed 10,000 tonnes of construction debris from other sites to create the base layer of the Woodland Village's new car park. They further reduced the village's carbon footprint by using sustainably sourced U.K. materials, including the lodges' shingle tiles and timber cladding.

The village's design incorporates energy-efficient buildings, renewable energy sources, natural landscaping that minimizes environmental impact, and newly planted trees. Facilities include 100% LED lighting, air-source heat pumps for cooling and heating, low global warming potential refrigerants, low-flow water dispensers and showers, and 100% electric kitchens. Electric buggies also drive down the carbon footprint.

"We are proud to operate a zero waste to landfill policy," Ilori adds. Later this year, Merlin will install solar photovoltaic panels on a resort car park to help power the Woodland Village. "Unlike fossil fuels, solar energy does not produce greenhouse gas emissions or air pollution during operation," he says. The solar array will also provide shade for guests parking beneath it on hot days.

"Sustainability is at the forefront of our minds," Ilori says, as Merlin's global attractions, including visitor accommodations, target carbon neutral operations by 2030. "We are focusing on improving four key areas—energy, waste, water, and conservation—and there are already some fantastic projects in place to support these. We have reduced our carbon emissions by 42% in the last eight years, but we have plans to go much further. Our ambitious goal is to be a net-zero carbon business." FW

**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.

PROSLIDE X WATER WORLD LLORET

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IAAPA Expo Europe
**Water Park Day** at
Water World Lloret

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See it in action during Water Park Day on September 22 at Water World or visit ProSlide at IAAPA Expo Europe on September 23rd - 25th at Booth 2-1247.

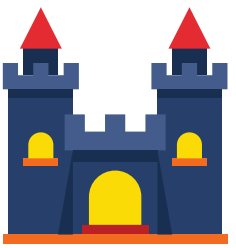
**SCAN TO READ MORE**

**THIS IS PROSLIDE**

*by Kelly Repass and Elaine Mathis*

# Updated IAAPA Global Benchmark Reports Now Available

IAAPA's 2025 Global Benchmark Reports provide a comprehensive overview of operations across amusement/theme parks, entertainment centers and water parks in 2024. Compiled from operator surveys, the reports aim to assist industry leaders with benchmarking a range of topics, including attraction mix, admissions, staffing, visitor demographics, revenue, and expenses. Key findings reveal activities offered and operational performance across sectors. With rising demand for interactive and immersive experiences, the data offer actionable insights for operators planning expansions, upgrades, or new offerings.



| | Amusement/ Theme Parks | Entertainment Centers | Water Parks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Avg. Attendance | 2.5 M | 460,000 | 480,000 |
| Avg. Gross Revenue | $45.3 M | $3.6 M | $9.3 M |
| Avg. Admission Price | $56 | $32 | $44 |
| **TOP ACTIVITIES:** | Family rides, coasters, rides for younger and older kids, carousels | Arcade games (redemption & non-redemption), laser tag, indoor playgrounds, VR/simulators | Body slides, toddler/kid's play areas, activity pools, tube slides, lazy rivers |

Explore IAAPA's research at **IAAPA.org/ResearchFinder** or scan the QR code.

**Kelly Repass** serves as IAAPA's vice president of global research. Her interest areas include strategic assessment, primary and secondary research, data analytics, and actionable insights to drive business performance and growth. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

**Elaine Mathis, Ph.D.** is IAAPA's senior research analyst, where she helps IAAPA members leverage research to improve their businesses and explore consumer personalization through co-creation and the experience economy. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

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# Association News and Benefits


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IAAPA NEWS

 *by Destiny Taylor, IAAPA manager, global communications*

# IAAPA Expo Asia 2025 Showcases Growth in Asia-Pacific Region

IAAPA EXPO ASIA 2025 WRAPPED UP in Shanghai with 7,093 verified attendees at the Shanghai New International Expo Center (SNIEC) following three days of learning, discovery, and networking. This year's event marked continued growth for IAAPA Expo Asia, exceeding last year's attendance and welcoming 5,651 qualified buyers from 85 countries—up 77% from 2024.

The trade show floor featured more than 350 exhibiting companies, highlighting emerging technologies, operational tools, and guest experience solutions from across the globe. Programming aligned with the event theme, Find Possible, offered curated education sessions, and behind-the-scenes EDUTours.

Highlights included the Opening Reception at Shanghai Disneyland and an exclusive EDUTour of the newly opened Legoland Shanghai. Keynote speakers included President and Managing Director of Disney Parks International Jill Estorino and Cecilia Qin, vice president of Trip.com Group.

"IAAPA Expo Asia 2025 delivered an impressive experience," says IAAPA President and Chief Executive Officer Jakob Wahl. "As an association, we take great pride in creating spaces where people and ideas come together. The connections made here in Shanghai—like those at all IAAPA events—are the foundation of lasting partnerships and continued collaboration."

The event also reinforced Shanghai's role in the regional market. "Hosting IAAPA Expo Asia 2025 here reinforces our commitment to supporting this dynamic region," adds Jack Chan, executive director and vice president of IAAPA Asia-Pacific.

IAAPA Expo Asia 2026 will take place in Hong Kong, China, from June 9-12. More than 200 companies have already contracted 5,300 square meters of exhibit space. FW

## ASIA EXPO BY THE NUMBERS

- **7,093** Verified Attendees
- **5,651** Qualified Buyers—***77% increase from last year***
- **85** Countries Represented
- **350+** Exhibiting Companies
- **60** Speakers
- **19** EDUSessions
- **4** Days of Connections

IAAPA

**Destiny Taylor** is IAAPA's global communications manager. She develops PR strategies for the association's global expos, executes communications campaigns, builds media relationships to secure leadership features in top-tier publications, and champions storytelling initiatives that connect the global attractions community. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

PHOTOS: IAAPA

 *Story and photos by Sean Bonner*

# Attendees Connect at IAAPA Presents: Holiday World & Splashin' Safari

ON JUNE 24 AND 25, HOLIDAY WORLD & SPLASHIN' SAFARI—the standout family-owned and operated theme park in Santa Claus, Indiana—hosted an IAAPA Presents event for attendees to learn best practices, receive insights from park leadership, and network. IAAPA packed the agenda with opportunities to experience the park's newest attractions and world-class water park. Attendees received an overview of Holiday World's unique guest-centric offerings like complimentary soft drinks, parking, and sunscreen. Attendees peeked behind the curtain and discovered operational insights into how the park attracts more than 2,000 team members, the driving force behind their industry-leading park cleanliness and guest service.

The event kicked off with a backstage tour of the Holidays in the Sky drone show. Lauren Crosby, fourth generation owner and director of entertainment and events and Eric Snow, chief marketing officer, explained the logistics of developing an evening show. The drone spectacular, which debuted in 2022, evolved as the park integrated more "wow moments" with pyrotechnics to delight crowds and encourage a longer length of stay.

After learning about the drone show, attendees moved to a private reception space to view the performance and then enjoyed evening access to attractions.

The event picked back up on Wednesday morning, with attendees treated to breakfast within Santa's Merry Marketplace. CEO Matt Eckert and fourth generation owner and director of marketing Leah Koch-Blumhardt explained how their "Power of Free" philosophy has driven brand loyalty.

Attendees then toured Holiday World's latest attraction, Good Gravy!, as Lauren and Leah walked attendees through the development of the attraction from original concept to opening day. Eric gave insight into the marketing campaign behind the new attraction and how the campaign for the family-friendly attraction garnered unprecedented social media impressions for the park.

Matt Blumhardt, chief operating officer and Lori Gogel, director of attractions, led a comprehensive walking tour of Splashin' Safari dedicated to themes of safety, revenue operations, water quality, and efficient operations. During a tour of team support areas, Chief People Officer Jeff Alexander provided insight into unique practices to enrich the team member experience, including recognition efforts, a team member store, and building partnerships with the parents of their workforce under the age of 18.

The event wrapped with a traditional Thanksgiving lunch, time to explore the park, and a tour of Compass Commons, an employee-exclusive dormitory Holiday World operates that aids the park in maintaining its staffing levels.

**Sean Bonner** is the director of education and membership for IAAPA North America. Connecting the attractions industry and producing programming to push the industry forward alongside volunteers, speakers and colleagues is his favorite component of his work at IAAPA. Connect with him on LinkedIn:

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# 2025 IAAPA Brass Ring Award Winner Spotlights

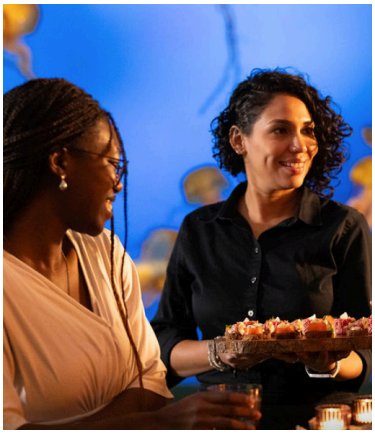
## Vancouver Aquarium

***Best New F&B Special Event or Festival – Fish & Sips at the Vancouver Aquarium***

Fish & Sips is an innovative blend of sustainable, locally sourced cuisine and immersive, themed experiences at the Vancouver Aquarium. Its seasonal menus, creative presentation, and unique after-hours setting offer guests a one-of-a-kind culinary journey.

***Best New Menu Item: Year-Round Operation – The Megalodon Burger***

A creative fusion of culinary innovation and thematic storytelling, this deep-sea burger brings the "Monsters of the Abyss" exhibit to life. Its bold flavors and visual impact have elevated the aquarium's dining program—and set a new standard for immersive food experiences.



VANCOUVER AQUARIUM

VANCOUVER AQUARIUM

**Interview with Anthony Pratt**
*Director, Business Operations at Vancouver Aquarium*

**What does it mean to you and your team to receive a Brass Ring Award?**
It's a proud and humbling moment for our entire team at the Vancouver Aquarium—being acknowledged alongside the industry's best and brightest leaders highlights the power of collaboration and our shared commitment to delivering unforgettable guest experiences.

**This award recognizes excellence in our global industry—what does this honor represent for your organization?**
It reflects our commitment to innovation, purposeful leadership, and guest-centered experiences that make memories worth repeating.

**How did it feel to be recognized on the global stage during IAAPA Honors?**
For all of us at the Vancouver Aquarium, it was a proud and humbling moment—being recognized among the best in the industry was an incredible honour that highlighted the creativity and care we put into our food and beverage programs. We're unbelievably grateful for the recognition.

**What advice would you offer to someone thinking about applying for a Brass Ring Award this year?**
Be authentic—tell the story of your impact, and showcase how your organization, like the Vancouver Aquarium, creates experiences that resonate with guests and reflect the heart of what you do.

**Are there lessons you learned during the application process—or aspects of your project or program—you feel made your entry stand out?**
Clarity, storytelling, and measurable outcomes always make a difference—but what truly stands out is when you believe in what you're submitting and take pride in sharing it with the global industry. From our experience at the Vancouver Aquarium, staying true to your identity and focusing on the guests you serve is what makes an entry genuinely resonate.

The deadline to apply for the 2026 IAAPA Brass Ring Awards is Oct. 10. Visit **IAAPA.org/Awards**

# Carnival Magic

***Live Entertainment Excellence — The Showstopper — River Carnival Parade***

River Carnival Parade's Guinness World Record-holding float took this indoor parade to the next level. On top of towering costumes, flying creatures, and massive barges seamlessly choreographed across a 70-meter stage, the jaw-dropping float was fit with intricate detail, and redefined the expectations of excellence in the world of parades.

CARNIVAL MAGIC

**Interview with Kittikorn Kewkacha**
*Carnival Magic President and CEO*

**What does it mean to you and your team to receive a Brass Ring Award?**

Receiving the Brass Ring Award has been an incredibly meaningful milestone for all of us at Carnival Magic. It represents not just recognition for a single achievement, but a validation of the passion, creativity, and dedication that our entire team has invested into crafting an experience that is truly one-of-a-kind. This award is a celebration of every artist, technician, designer, performer, and staff member who brought our vision to life—from the fantastical floats of the River Carnival Parade to the dazzling illuminations of our Kingdom of Lights.

**This award recognizes excellence in our global industry—what does this honor represent for your organization?**

Being honored by IAAPA on a global stage is deeply humbling. The Brass Ring Award is one of the most prestigious distinctions in the attractions industry, and to have Carnival Magic—a nighttime theme park inspired by the vibrant spirit of Thai festivals—recognized among the best in the world is both surreal and inspiring. It confirms that our mission to celebrate Thai culture through immersive storytelling and cutting-edge entertainment has struck a chord far beyond our borders.

**How did it feel to be recognized on the global stage during IAAPA Honors?**

The moment our name was announced at IAAPA Honors is one we will never forget. To be celebrated among our peers and industry leaders from around the globe was incredibly emotional. It felt like the world was acknowledging not just our show, but the essence of what Carnival Magic represents—a joyful, imaginative tribute to Thailand's rich cultural heritage, lit in wonder and spectacle.

**What advice would you offer to someone thinking about applying for a Brass Ring Award this year?**

To those considering applying for a Brass Ring Award, we encourage you to be bold and authentic. Tell your story with honesty and pride. Let your values, your culture, and your passion shine through. For us, staying true to the vision of Carnival Magic—a dream nearly two decades in the making—was key.

**Are there lessons you learned during the application process—or aspects of your project or program—you feel made your entry stand out?**

Throughout the application process, we learned how powerful it is to embrace what makes your attraction different. In our case, the sheer scale of the River Carnival Parade, combined with the emotional resonance of Thai celebration and a meticulous level of showmanship, helped us stand out. But more than the technical achievements, it was our unwavering belief in the magic we wanted to share that truly carried the project. FW

# Plan to Attend IAAPA LEGENDS 2025: A Hall of Fame Celebratory Affair

PHOTOS: IAAPA

PLANNING IS UNDERWAY for one of the attractions industry's most glamorous and anticipated evenings—IAAPA LEGENDS 2025: A Hall of Fame Celebratory Affair. This year's event will take place on Monday, Nov. 17, from 6:30 to 10 p.m. at the Orange County Convention Center's North Concourse (N320), held in conjunction with IAAPA Expo 2025.

A highlight of the evening will be the presentation of the 2025 IAAPA Hall of Fame Awards, recognizing individuals who have made a lasting impact on the global attractions industry. The newest IAAPA Hall of Fame inductees will be announced in September.

In addition to celebrating industry legends, the event will also support the IAAPA Foundation (a U.S. 501(C)(3) tax-exempt charity, separate from IAAPA, a 501(C)(6) trade association) through silent and live auctions. Last year's auctions raised an impressive $80,000, which IAAPA generously matched, helping to fund programs that develop future industry leaders. To commit to an auction donation for 2025, please visit the LEGENDS event website to fill out the auction donation form.

General registration is open now. Be sure to be present for this can't-miss celebration of industry excellence.

Visit **IAAPA.org/Legends** for additional details or to register.

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# 2025 GLOBAL EXHIBITORS

| COMPANY | BOOTH |
|---|---|
| abc rides switzerland | 1-1129 |
| accesso | 1-220 |
| ACE Amusement | 2-1057 |
| ADLER | 2-689 |
| Aerophile S.A.S | 1-125 |
| Alterface | 1-253 |
| Altus / Koala Equipment | 2-780 |
| ANKAM WATER PARK EQUIPMENTS | 2-1015 |
| Aquakita | 2-907 |
| Arihant Water Park Equipment | 1-209 |
| Arrowy Racing | 2-1212 |
| Avius | 2-1730 |
| Axess | 2-1548 |
| Bertazzon | 1-910 |
| Black Light Unity: Blacklight Print & Design | 2-1620 |
| Bolliger & Mabillard Inc. | 2-327 |
| Brogent Technologies, Inc. | 1-1221 |
| Brunswick Bowling Products | 2-947 |
| Cheer Amusement (Nanjing) Co.Ltd. | 2-1530 |
| Concept 1900 | 1-939 |
| Delta Strike International Ltd | 1-133 |
| DOF Robotics | 1-600,1-900 |
| Domerry Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1778 |
| Dongguan Unistar Industrial Limited | 1-559 |
| Dotto | 1-619 |
| Ellis & Associates | 1-239 |
| Embed | 2-773 |
| entertainment resource GmbH | 1-829 |
| ETF Ride Systems | 1-904 |
| Fabbri Group | 1-430 |
| Funlandia Play Systems Inc. | 2-628 |
| Gengu Dinosaurs Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1572 |
| Gibbons Inflatable Blowers | 2-641 |
| Gosetto | 1-417 |
| Great Coasters International, Inc. | 1-635 |
| Guangdong Dream Catch Recreation Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1634 |
| Guangdong H-FUN Water Recreational Articles Co. Ltd. | 2-1726 |
| Guangzhou Colorful park Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-256 |
| Guangzhou Dudu Sugar Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1293 |
| Guangzhou EPARK Electronic Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-258 |
| Guangzhou Ifun Park Technology Co. Ltd | 2-673 |
| Guangzhou Infinity Technology Co. ltd. | 2-1554 |
| Guangzhou Jiuyou Animation Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1765 |
| Guangzhou Leqi Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-674 |
| Guangzhou Movie Power Technology Co.Ltd. | 2-1265 |
| Guangzhou Sea Animation Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-913 |
| Guangzhou Wahlap Technology Corporation Limited | 2-580 |
| Guangzhou Yinghua Technology Co. Ltd | 2-166 |
| Guangzhou Yingpin Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1398 |
| HAFEMA Water Rides GmbH | 1-633 |
| Haiber Play Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-128 |
| Hangzhou Hogwood Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1013 |
| Hangzhou Trains Equipment Co. Ltd. | 1-1240 |
| Haystack Dryers Limited | 1-522 |
| Henan Dinis Entertainment Technology Co. Ltd | 2-615 |
| Holovis | 2-190 |
| Hualong Dino Works | 2-1640 |
| Huss Park Attractions | 1-225 |
| HY Technology Ltd | 2-255 |
| I.E. Park S.r.l./Amusement Rides & SOLI Bumper Cars | 1-1033 |
| Immersive Planet | 1-1507 |
| Intamin | 1-928 |
| Intelligent Entertainment | 2-506 |
| Intercard, Inc. | 2-1093 |
| InterPark Magazine | 1-514 |
| JB-Tagsolutions BV | 2-637,2-937 |
| Jinma Rides | 1-948 |
| KristallTurm GmbH & Co.KG | 1-435 |
| Lagotronics Projects | 1-409 |
| Laserforce | 2-710 |
| LaserTag.com by Zone | 2-647 |
| LDP | 2-164 |
| Lefunland Recreation Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-905 |
| Leisure Activities | 2-330 |
| Liben Group Wenzhou Toy Co. Ltd. | 1-403 |
| LightUpToys.com | 1-953 |
| MACK Rides | 1-614 |
| Martin & Vleminckx Ltd | 1-943 |
| Maurer Rides | 1-1207 |
| Mich Playground Co. Ltd. | 2-651 |
| Moser's Rides | 1-504 |
| Murphys Waves Ltd | 1-242 |
| Neofuns Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-184 |
| Nets Tribe | 2-769 |
| Neveplast | 1-201 |
| Oplay Solution (Shanghai) Co. Ltd | 2-1636 |
| Pokiddo Active Entertainment | 2-712 |
| Polgun Waterparks & Attractions | 2-527 |
| Polin Waterparks | 2-1230 |
| Premier Rides | 1-628 |
| Preston & Barbieri | 1-608 |
| ProSlide Technology, Inc. | 2-1247 |
| Purr Play | 2-314 |
| Qilong Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-186 |
| QubicaAMF | 1-1225 |
| RCI Adventure Products | 2-1296 |
| Reverchon / SAMC | 1-1135 |
| Rides and Fun | 2-1641 |
| RMC | 1-260 |
| Rover International | 1-503 |
| S&S Worldwide | 1-905 |
| Sacoa Cashless System | 2-1658 |
| SARTORI | 1-424 |
| Satisfi Labs | 2-269 |
| SBF - Visa | 1-625 |
| Semnox Solutions LLC | 2-664 |
| Severn Lamb & Trams International | 1-1130 |
| Shanghai Jegoplay Facilities Group Co. Ltd | 2-226 |
| Simtec Systems | 1-453 |
| Simworx Limited | 1-442 |
| Sindrax Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1757 |
| SKIDATA | 2-1295 |
| Sub Sea Systems, Inc. | 1-555 |
| Sunkid GmbH | 1-834 |
| SUNZEE | 2-800 |
| Synergy Waterpark Rides Pvt. Ltd. | 1-1413 |
| Technical Park | 1-925 |
| Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) | 1-1027 |
| Themics Philippines Inc. | 1-411 |
| Triotech | 1-913 |
| TÜV NORD | 1-450 |
| Unique Animation | 2-1276 |
| Unis Technology (H.K) Limited | 2-1283 |
| Uremet Corporation | 1-438 |
| Vekoma Rides Manufacturing B.V. | 1-604 |
| VENU+ | 2-1752 |
| VIVATICKET | 2-1543 |
| Walltopia | 1-639 |
| Water Technology, Inc. | 1-406 |
| WhiteWater | 1-922 |
| WhiteWater Surf | 1-722 |
| Wibit Sports | 2-600 |
| Wider Matrix (GZ) Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1724 |
| Wiegand Josef GMBH & Co. KG | 1-1218 |
| Wiegand.Waterrides GmbH | 1-1220 |
| World Waterpark Association | 1-205 |
| WOW Company International | 2-604 |
| X-Kart | 2-915 |
| Yuehua Industry Co. Ltd. | 2-759 |
| Yuto(Guangzhou) Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1775 |
| Zamperla Group | 1-918 |
| Zhengzhou Prodigy Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-273 |
| Zhengzhou Tonle Inflatables Co. Ltd. | 2-140 |
| Zhengzhou Winsun Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-130 |
| Zhongshan Cheer Entertainment Technology Co. Ltd | 2-271 |
| Zhongshan Luck & Jinying Amusement Machine Co. Ltd | 2-1650 |
| Zhuji Yinuo Weite Knitting Co. Ltd | 2-672 |
| ZIERER | 1-425 |

# 2025 FIRST TIME EXHIBITORS

| COMPANY | BOOTH |
|---|---|
| Ace Manufactory Limited | 2-197 |
| Adler Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-689 |
| AIX HYDRO | TT-001 |
| Anhui Thindy Slide Co. Ltd. | 2-1012 |
| Aquafun Parks Products S.L. | 2-157 |
| Aqualine Waterparks & Technology | 2-105 |
| Aquatique Show | 2-1689 |
| Barrado | 2-928 |
| Beijing Red Sun Bowling Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1795 |
| Bellus Toys & Creative Concepts | 2-291 |
| Binzhou Colorful Nets Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-180 |
| Birelart srl | 2-1288 |
| Cangzhou Warrior Outward Bound Appliance Co. Ltd. | TT-026 |
| CDX Technology | 2-1655 |
| Chargerent | 1-1533 |
| Cinchio Solutions | 2-118 |
| Clear Digital | 2-1291 |
| Cloud Programing Online Co. Ltd | TT-011 |
| Conductr Ltd | 2-997 |
| Curator Live Photo & Video Solutions | TT-022 |
| DFX | TT-008 |
| Elephant Sculpture Art Company Ltd. | TT-024 |
| EPT Photography | 2-414 |
| Evolution Game Service S.R.L. | 2-1505 |
| Festopolis | 2-1491 |
| Fjord Hütten GmbH | 1-246 |
| Flame Stone | 2-1105 |
| Gameside | 2-1507 |
| GIEFFE Videogames | 2-379 |
| Global Fun Partners, S.L. | 2-325 |
| Gomy Floor | TT-018 |
| GRO Leisure | 2-1702 |
| GTI & GTI-Amuse | 2-1504 |
| Guangdong Dream Catch Recreation Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-1634 |
| Guangdong Free Luck Animation Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-252 |
| Guangdong Funcore Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-313 |
| Guangzhou Ama Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1709 |
| Guangzhou Chuangyong Sports Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-812 |
| Guangzhou Clever Fun House Animation Entertainment Co. Ltd. | 2-1708 |
| Guangzhou Dudu Sugar Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1293 |
| Guangzhou Funzone Games Co. Ltd | 2-1603 |
| Guangzhou Huazhile Electronic Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-251 |
| Guangzhou Kingbot Animation Technology | 2-156 |
| Guangzhou Playpedia Amusement | 2-1792 |
| Guangzhou Povi Amusement Co. Ltd. | 2-1406 |
| Guangzhou Sea Animation Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-913 |
| Guangzhou Sipuls Electronics Co. Ltd | TT-009 |
| Guangzhou Taikongyi Amusement Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1690 |
| Guangzhou Wakee Amusement Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1627 |
| Guangzhou Yihuanyuan Electronic Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1106 |
| Guangzhou Yingpin Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1398 |
| Guangzhou Youpin Youzan Cultural Development Co.Ltd. | 2-1205 |
| Guangzhou Yue Dragon Unita Software Technology Co,ltd | 2-1723 |
| Guangzhou Yulong Intelligent Sports Co. Ltd. | 2-275 |
| Guangzhou Zhuoman Animation Technology Co. Ltd | 2-692 |
| HangZhou ZhangMeng Software Co. Ltd. | 2-1512 |
| Happy Food Ltd | 2-1735 |
| Henan Dinis Entertainment Technology Co. Ltd | 2-615 |
| Henan Zhongzheng Amusement Equipment Manufacturing Group | 2-1305 |
| Him Entertainment GmbH | 2-1101 |
| HY Technology Ltd | 2-255 |
| Ifond Games Co. Ltd | 2-903 |
| Imaginize Ltd | 1-257 |
| Jinan Longgang Inflatable | 2-150 |
| JP Showsystems Limited | 2-118 |
| KaraFun Business | 2-191 |
| Laser Fight | 2-155 |
| LÖWEN DART | 1-1438 |
| Lucky Nine Games | 2-1006 |
| Max Game Manufacturer Co. Ltd. | 2-1313 |
| MINGYU Entertainment Equipment Co.Ltd | 2-1637 |
| Mountain Innovations | 1-528 |
| MYCOTOO | 2-992 |
| Nanjing Fagoo Electronics Technology Co. Ltd | TT-013 |
| Nanjing Huanlechang Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | TT-002 |
| Nano Systems H.K. Limited | 2-270 |
| Novus Attractions | 2-1606 |
| Oplay Solution (Shanghai) Co. Ltd | 2-1636 |
| PebbleTec | 2-188 |
| Play by Play Toys & Novelties | 2-170 |
| Play Makers | 2-380 |
| PortAventura - Adventure Labs | 2-1794 |
| Purrplay Amusement Equipment | 2-314 |
| Research Casting International | TT-004 |
| Ruimove (Yancheng) Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-1212 |
| Satisfi Labs | 2-269 |
| Shandong Bonhong Technology Co. Ltd. | TT-003 |
| Shanghai Giantisland Import and Export Trading Co. LTD | 2-512 |
| Shanghai Jego Play Facilities Group Co. Ltd | 2-226 |
| Shenzhen Lesterlighting Technology Company Limited | 2-912 |
| SimVenture GmbH | 2-310 |
| Sindrax Technology Co. Ltd | 2-1757 |
| SingPod | 2-118 |
| SkyTechSport | 2-1299 |
| Smarte Carte | 2-1767 |
| Sportopia Limited | TT-010 |
| Superstar BV | TT-021 |
| Take Care Trading | 2-114 |
| Taki Playground | 2-1621 |
| The Deluxe Group | 2-118 |
| TKM Animation Technology Co. Ltd. | 2-612 |
| Tomorrowland Leisure | 2-493 |
| Top Tree Decoration Co. Ltd | 2-613 |
| US Design Lab | 2-1312 |
| Vending Sabadell, SL | 2-1391 |
| Wahlap Tech | 2-580 |
| WASP | 2-115 |
| Waveast Installation & Park Services | TT-023 |
| Wenling City HongFu Machinery Co. Ltd. | 2-139 |
| Xingrui Animation | 2-1516 |
| Xtremebarriers | 2-386 |
| Yitoon Limited | 2-179 |
| Yiwu Sungnan Import And Export Co. Ltd. | 2-1115 |
| Zhejiang Children's Play Home Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-149 |
| Zhejiang Leban Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-152 |
| Zhejiang Phipher New Materials Co. Ltd. | 2-236 |
| Zhejiang Ruixue Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd | 2-1206 |
| Zhengzhou Cheery Amusement Equipment | 2-693 |
| Zhengzhou Huajin Amusement Equipment | 2-196 |
| Zhengzhou Prodigy Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-273 |
| Zhengzhou Tonle Inflatables Co. Ltd. | 2-140 |
| Zhongshan Aobaite Metal Industrial Co. Ltd. | 2-235 |
| Zhongshan Childhood Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd. | 2-268 |
| Zhongshan Qileshi Amuesment Equipment Co. LTD | 2-921 |
| Zhuji Yisen Imp and Exp Co. Ltd. | 2-1503 |
| Zigong Blue Lizard Landscape Engineering Co. Ltd. | 2-813 |
| Zigong Kawah Handicrafts Manufacturing Co. Ltd. | 2-316 |
| Zigong Longtu Dinosaur Art Co. Ltd | 2-505 |
| Zigong Zhongcai Cultural Arts | 2-1403 |

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

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

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This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of August 7, 2025, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit **IAAPA.org/Events**

## SEPTEMBER 2025

**IAAPA Forum: Sustainability**
9 | Online

**Tips for Exhibitors**
10 | Online

**IAAPA Forum: Human Talent**
11 | Online

**IAAPA Public Affairs Conference 2025**
15-17 | Washington, D.C.

**IAAPA APAC Trade Summit**
September 16-17 | Macau, China

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE
22-26 | Barcelona, Spain

**Webinar: Beyond Birthday Parties: Building Profitable Events in Your Organization**
25 | Online

**IAAPA Bootcamp: Water Parks**
29-30 | São Paulo, Brazil

## OCTOBER 2025

**IAAPA Summit: Entertainment Centers**
16-17 | Mexico City, Mexico

**IAAPA Meetup: The Funplex**
21 | Mt Laurel Township, New Jersey

**IAAPA Presents: Drayton Manor and Beyond**
23-25 | Drayton Bassett, England

**IAAPA Bootcamp: Water Parks**
29-30 | São Paulo, Brazil

## NOVEMBER 2025

**IAAPA LEGENDS: A Hall of Fame Celebratory Affair**
17 | Orlando

IAAPA EXPO
18-21 | Orlando

## DECEMBER 2025

**IAAPA Presents: Poland**
11 | Łódź, Poland

## FEBRUARY 2026

**IAAPA FEC Summit 2026**
1-3 | Glendale, Arizona

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# Plopsa's New Chapter

## CEO Carl Lenaerts aims to build a values-led family theme park business that forges emotional connections

*by Juliana Gilling*
*photos by Kris Van de Sande*

AS A YOUNG BOY, CARL LENAERTS COLLECTED MORE THAN 100 SMURF FIGURINES. Little did he know that in 2025, as the CEO of the Plopsa Group, he'd launch a new dark ride featuring Papa Smurf, Smurfette, and the famous blue tribe. The premiere of The Smurfs' Adventure ride at Plopsaland Deutschland coincides with the release of the new, all-star animated movie "Smurfs" in cinemas this summer.

The enduring magic of this beloved intellectual property (IP) is a testament to how timeless stories and characters can leave a lasting impression on hearts young and old. Through Plopsa's parent company, Belgian media and entertainment group Studio 100, Lenaerts and his team have access to an enviable catalogue of content. Plopsa found success leveraging popular television and film IPs, such as Samson & Marie, Plop the Gnome, Maya the Bee, Vic the Viking, Heidi, and Bumba the clown, to bring its parks to life. This winning strategy resulted in 3.4 million visitors for the group's European destinations in 2024. Total turnover for Studio 100 (including Plopsa) in 2024 reached €260 million. That figure is expected to rise to €300 million in 2025, boosted by projects with Netflix and live shows.

### Developing a Destination Ecosystem

Plopsa feels like a perfect fit for Lenaerts. After starting out as a banker, he moved into management at leading global cinema chain Kinepolis. "I knew then that I had leisure blood in my veins," he says. "Selling emotions gives me a good feeling. It's also business—money has to be earned." Lenaerts' career included executive roles in sports and book retail businesses before Plopsa used a head hunter to recruit him in 2023.

"My former CEO at Kinepolis always said to me, 'Cinema is not rocket science, but you have to control a lot of elements to make a cinema experience the best.' Now, when we meet up, I say to him, 'You're right, but running a theme park group is rocket science!'"

Few sectors are as operationally complex as the attractions industry. Plopsa has grown into an entertainment powerhouse that includes eight theme parks across Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, along with a 1,000-bed hospitality business at Plopsaland Resort Belgium.

Studio 100's founders, Gert Verhulst and Hans Bourlon, started with Plopsaland Belgium (formerly Meli-Park before becoming Plopsaland De Panne) in 2000. Plopsa Coo, rebranded as Plopsaland Ardennes in July, followed in 2006. Initially, the group had two indoor parks: Plopsa Indoor Hasselt in Belgium and Plopsa Indoor Coevorden in the Netherlands. Then, in 2020, Plopsa acquired Comics Station Antwerp, notable for being one of the world's first amusement parks inside an international train station, and transformed the attraction into Plopsa Station Antwerp.

The group took over Holiday Park—now known as Plopsaland Deutschland—in Haßloch, Germany, in 2010. Plopsa operates a shop at the Wijnegem - Shop Eat Enjoy mall, another Plop-Up shop in Nieuwpoort, and the Studio 100 Theater at Plopsaland Belgium.

Plopsa added a water park, Plopsaqua, with theming inspired by Studio 100's classic children's characters, next to Plopsaland Belgium in 2015. Plopsa invested 25 million euros in a second Belgian water park, Plopsaqua Hannut-Landen, which opened fully in 2021.

Plopsa is positioning Plopsaland Belgium as a multi-day resort close to the Belgian coast, combining the park's 55 attractions with Plopsaqua, the theater, and overnight stays. The group opened the Plopsaland Theater Hotel in 2020 at a cost of €25 million. The 117-room hotel immerses guests in the world of their Studio 100 heroes, with themed suites featuring Pat the Pirate, Maya the Bee, and Bumba. Guests can also stay at the 55 cozy 4-star villas in the Plopsaland Village, which opened in time for Christmas 2024.

Together, the Plopsaland Belgium developments drove record growth in 2024. The whole resort welcomed more than 1.6 million visitors and saw turnover increase by 15%. The Plopsaland Theater Hotel welcomed more than 40,000 guests and Plopsaqua De Panne entertained 271,433 swimmers. Visitor numbers at the park this Easter were 33% higher than last year's figures, continuing the upward trajectory.

"The growth we've achieved confirms that our focus on the total experience is working," Lenaerts says. "These record figures are a great recognition of the hard work of our entire team."

working," Lenaerts says. "These record figures are a great recognition of the hard work of our entire team."

Lenaerts is now on quite a ride. "The funny thing is that somebody asked me after the cinemas, 'What are you going to do now?' I said I'd maybe like to run a big hotel. But now Plopsa's given me a hotel, water parks, indoor parks, and theme parks. So, I feel lucky, but I asked for a hotel, and they gave me everything!" Lenaerts laughs.

He strives to manage the complexities of Plopsa's business so that it provides a seamless, emotionally engaging experience for guests.

## Defining a Strategic Vision

Lenaerts took over as CEO at a transitional time for Plopsa, following a series of leadership changes. "I was thrilled to become the new CEO," he says. He began by speaking with the founders, shareholders, and directors to define Plopsa's direction as a family theme park group.

"We started drawing up the strategy—what I call the hard-core side of the business. We have to be sure about the way to go. People are the soft part, and I found a group of enthusiastic, knowledgeable people committed to the brand." Empowered by their support, he felt ready to start a new chapter for Plopsa.

**"At every level of our organization, we start with the 'Why?' Why are we going to do this? And what's your role in that?"**

Attraction leaders must share a clear storyline with their staff, he believes. Lenaerts takes a leaf out of motivational speaker and author Simon Sinek's book. "At every level of our organization, we start with the 'Why?' Why are we going to do this? And what's your role in that?"

From the executives to the front-line teams, he wants everyone at Plopsa to know their purpose, why their work matters, and how it contributes to the guest experience. To Lenaerts, an efficient organization resembles a Swiss-made Swatch watch, where all the parts, large and small, work together in perfect precision.

Lenaerts spends a great deal of time talking and listening to his teams. "Because they know what our visitors want. They know

A large crowd gathers for the grand re-opening of Plopsaland Deutschland, formerly Holiday Park, on June 28, 2025.

Children meet with Plopsa's unique and beloved cast of characters.

the problems and the challenges. They see the opportunities. Everybody knows that my office door is always open. I enjoy going to the parks, but I also like that people come to me—to drink a coffee, talk business and football, cycling, and other things."

Lenaerts believes short lines of communication can make businesses more agile, improve decision making, identify issues, support innovation, and promote a culture of openness, trust, and collaboration.

He wants to create a strong values-led organisation at Plopsa, with everyone aligned behind four pillars: Safety and Security, Quality, Experience and Entertainment, and Human Capital. In addition, growth is a priority for Lenaerts. "The theme park industry is capital intensive, so we need to make a profit. Growth is very important to make the first three things happen," he says. "If you do things right, people will spend money with you."

## Exciting Expansions

With the fundamentals in place, Lenaerts is looking toward exciting new developments in the pipeline. There's great news for guests of The Ride to Happiness by Tomorrowland roller coaster, Europe's first Xtreme Spinning Coaster from MACK Rides, which launched at Plopsaland Belgium in 2021. Lenaerts reveals Plopsa is teaming up again with the Tomorrowland electronic music festival and MACK Rides for a second themed roller coaster at Plopsaland Deutschland.

There's a clear synergy with Plopsa here: Tomorrowland is a world-class brand, with a dedicated fan base that loves its entertainment and experiences. "A lot of their DNA comes back to what we want in our park, so we are looking forward to a second cooperation with Tomorrowland," Lenaerts says. The partners are working hard on the creative concept, track, and theming. "It won't be a copy and paste of the original coaster."

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Plopsaland's entertainment and attractions feature a suite of beloved IPs and popular German characters.

This year, Plopsa has expanded IP-driven offerings across its parks. Plopsaland Deutschland's new additions include the Blinky Bill Zone, the Smurfs' Adventure dark ride, which opened on June 28, and the Plopsa Festival Parade featuring German characters. A Gerstlauer family coaster, themed around the werewolf Freddy Lupin from "100% Wolf" will debut at the park this fall.

Plopsa plans to transform Plopsaland Deutschland, as it did Plopsaland Belgium, using a multifaceted approach: blending an outdoor park with an indoor park, a water park, and hospitality. A new Plopsaqua water park is coming in 2028. Costing more than €40 million, the project is part of Plopsa's €100-million investment in the German park.

With the park's strategic location and proximity to France, Luxembourg, and Belgium, Lenaerts is convinced that Plopsaland Deutschland has the potential to match—and even exceed—Plopsaland Belgium's performance in the long term.

## Partying at Plopsaland Belgium

Plopsaland Belgium continues to build upon the success of Studio 100's Night Watch (Nachtwacht) TV series, based on the adventures of a teenage vampire, elf, and werewolf. Now there's a new Nachtwacht-themed area for guests to discover. The park's De Draak roller coaster has received a makeover and a new name, Draconis, to match.

Wickie's Wervelwind, a Vic the Viking-themed Wild Swing from Art Engineering, is another fresh ride for families to enjoy in the Wickieland area this season.

To mark its 25th anniversary in 2025, Plopsaland Belgium has planned an exciting program. A new Celebration Parade features eight themed floats, Studio 100 characters, dancers, and a soundtrack composed for the spectacle. Guests can enjoy a wide range of shows. "We will also have 25 evening openings this year, so people can spend all day and night at the park," Lenaerts adds.

At IAAPA Europe Expo 2025 in Sept., Plopsa will announce a major new IP-based indoor attraction for Plopsaland Belgium, in collaboration with MACK Rides.

## Character-Filled Fun

Destination businesses are constantly seeking ways to differentiate themselves and boost year-round engagement. Plopsa uses festivals and events to enhance core offerings and attract repeat guests.

**“These are all little things that show your people that they are part of one big family.”**

The year-long Studio 100 Festival, featuring guest favorite characters, shows, and magical encounters, helped drive attendance growth at Plopsaland Belgium. Kid-friendly Halloween and winter offerings are also popular with their family audiences.

Plopsa’s mission statement emphasizes that its attractions should be accessible and affordable to all. “Everybody should have the opportunity to come to one of our parks and give their children the best day or two of their life,” Lenaerts says.

He recognizes how a character’s wave or embrace can light up guests. “I sometimes think to myself, ‘Why do we need all these expensive attractions?’ Because our IP is touchable—you can hug it and give it high fives. For children, it’s the most important moment of their day.”

## Shaping the Future

Lenaerts wants Plopsa to follow a path of incremental growth. “I don’t believe in the big jump. We have to do a little better every day. Those baby steps all add up to a big step.”

However, if the right opportunity arises, acquisitions could figure in Plopsa’s future. The fact that major players, including Disney, Universal, and Puy Du Fou, are pursuing new parks in the Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) region underlines the potential. “We all believe in the future of theme parks. If the whole theme park sector works well, it has a positive impact on everybody, especially those who do a good job,” he says.

“We will look to grow our own parks first,” he says. However, Plopsa’s acquisition history also gives it the expertise to capitalize on new opportunities. “If it fits in our strategy, then we will look at it,” Lenaerts shares.

He is also exploring ways to use new technologies, including data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance operational efficiency, improve forecasting, optimize profitability, and reduce costs. “I don’t think AI will completely take over the family theme park business. The human factor is crucial,” he says. Lenaerts sees its value behind the scenes, using AI-driven tools to extract insights and patterns for better decision making. The technology should support, rather than overshadow, the emotional connection guests are seeking at Plopsa’s destinations.

Lenaerts wants his team to feel that same emotional bond with Plopsa. Beyond its ongoing investment in learning and development, the group fosters a sense of community through events such as the annual staff barbecues and breakfasts held across all Plopsa parks. Recognizing everyone’s effort is vital, he believes. “These are all little things that show your people that they are part of one big family.” FW

*plopsa.com*

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# Overnight

## *European theme parks strive to create high-quality accommodations*

*by Juliana Gilling*

EUROPE'S THEME PARKS ARE UPPING THEIR GAME to tempt short-break travelers with a growing menu of overnight options tailored to every taste and budget.

Tapping into the latest trends can produce returns as the rising demand for memorable travel experiences drives interest in themed trips, boutique hotels, culinary adventures, nature-friendly accommodations, and wellness retreats. The challenge lies in seamlessly blending entertainment, hospitality, and smart technology to create the perfect guest journey.

### Efteling's Grand Opening

Efteling Grand Hotel, which opened this summer at the Efteling theme park resort in the Netherlands, evokes the elegance of a bygone era. "Visitors can expect a residence of grandeur, providing a unique and elevated experience for guests," says Sander de Bruijn, manager of design and experience at Efteling.

The Efteling Grand Hotel represents a premium accommodation offering—the "next natural step" in the resort's evolution, according to De Bruijn. Situated alongside the newly renovated Efteling Wonder Hotel, Efteling's latest hotel puts guests inside the park. "Efteling Grand Hotel visitors can expect a seamless visitor experience, with fairy tales, roller coasters, and attractions right on their doorstep," De Bruijn says.

The design is an homage to Europe's classic grand dame hotels, blending stylish surroundings with subtle fairytale and storytelling flourishes. De Bruijn took inspiration from a fairytale scene in the park, depicting the Golden Goose.

# Success

Bellhops invite guests into an atmospheric lobby, redolent of the park's storied heritage. A grand piano plays while magical golden keys shimmer above visitors' heads. The menu at Brasserie 7 (one of two hotel restaurants) features seven fairytale-inspired ingredients. Guest rooms include a special fairytale book that continues the story.

The Efteling Grand Hotel has 140 rooms and 644 beds across seven floors, ranging from Premium Deluxe rooms to the luxurious Excellence Tower Suite. A fully digital check-in streamlines the guest experience (while staff stand ready to assist). Guest license plates are tracked to monitor their arrival times. Room keys appear automatically on their smartphones. Guests can dine at the Restaurant-Bar Mystique, overlooking the park's Aquanura water show, or relax in the hotel spa. Café Biscuit serves fresh coffee, while guests can browse the nearby hotel boutique.

Positioned adjacent to the park's front gate, the Efteling Grand Hotel further strengthens Efteling's accommodation line-up, which includes the Bosrijk and Loonsche Land properties. The combined developments show Efteling's flexibility in adapting to changing guest expectations and booking patterns.

EFTELING

PLEASURE BEACH RESORT

Pleasure Beach Resort's polished and distinctive Boulevard hotel.

## Blackpool Broadens the Guest List

"Our hotels have made a huge impact on our business, for the better. They increase the length of stay of our park guests, as well as providing year-round income," says Amanda Thompson OBE, CEO of Pleasure Beach Resort in Blackpool, England.

While many might have expected the resort to build themed hotels, it opted for versatile, year-round accommodations. "We designed our hotels for both leisure guests and the business market. Our hotels are not park hotels; we focus on looking after guests to Blackpool and Pleasure Beach," Thompson explains.

"Our first hotel, the Big Blue Hotel, was built for charm, comfort, and affordability, and has incredible views of the park," she says. Park fans can see rides including The Big One, ICON, and The Big Dipper from their rooms.

Boulevard brings luxury and style to Blackpool with fine dining and ocean views from the bedrooms. Business guests can work and relax in this private hideaway on the promenade. The hotels host conferences and have even welcomed three British prime ministers. The Big Blue Hotel has 157 rooms; Boulevard has 120.

Recreational activities allow guests of Plopsaland Village to enjoy nature together.

PLOPSA

"The market for hotels is growing in the resort, and guests have become more aspirational since COVID-19. We're finding that more Big Blue customers have upgraded to Boulevard as an indulgent treat," Thompson says.

The resort aims for 90% occupancy. "Although we aren't there, the hotel business is growing in size and experiencing increasing occupancy year on year. We have also seen a marked improvement with direct bookings through our hotel website, which is very positive as we can focus offers through our own site," Thompson says.

## Plopsa Extends Beyond the Park Gates

With Plopsaland Belgium attracting more than 1.3 million annual visitors, the demand for on-site accommodation had become increasingly clear. "Adding a hotel supported the resort's growth and extended the guest experience beyond the park's opening hours," says Xavier Verellen, chief marketing and sales officer at Plopsa.

The Plopsaland Theater Hotel—launched in 2020—has welcomed more than 253,000 guests since its debut. Occupancy rates have reached 94% in peak periods, such as August, when the hotel's proximity to the park and seaside proves a winning combination.

"The goal was to let families continue the Plopsaland experience after a day in the park," Verellen explains. Plopsa's creative director Piet De Koninck designed a hotel that set the stage for further adventures. Themed rooms and suites extend the magic. Families can stay overnight in immersive environments inspired by favorite characters and stories. The experience "creates memories that go beyond a single-day visit," Verellen says.

Recently, the Plopsaland Village opened, offering more affordable holiday accommodation. Built in a cottage style, the 55 villas have a relaxing, neutral aesthetic compared to the highly themed hotel suites. "We've learned the importance of variety. With the hotel, the villa resort, and the chalets, we offer a range of options to suit different preferences and budgets," Verellen says.

Plopsaland Belgium's team has adapted the park experience to include

creating
unforgettable
memories

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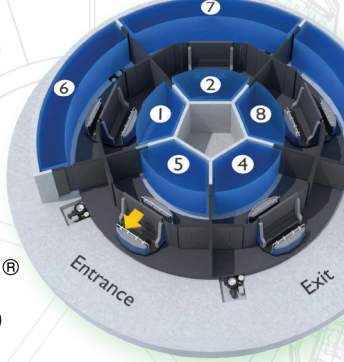


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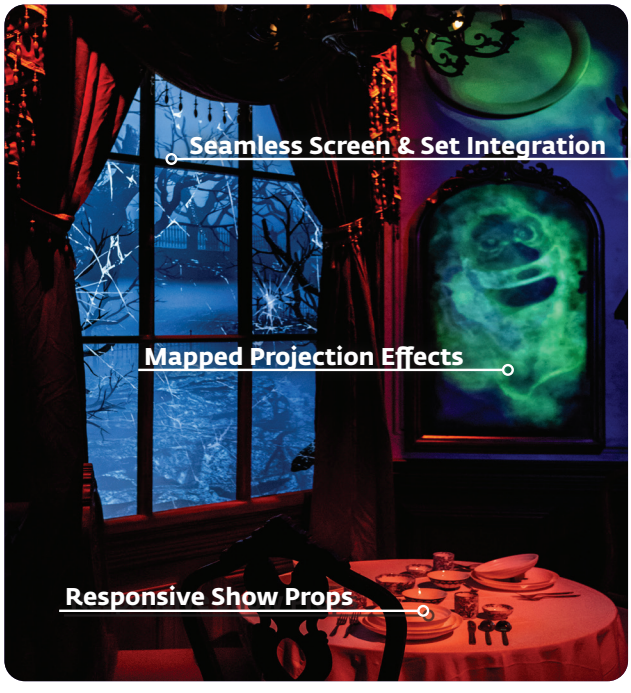
## Small Footprint, Big Impact

### Ghostly Manor, The Gameplay Theater at Paultons Park

The ride, launched on 17 May 2025, is already receiving recognition as one of the most ambitious dark ride experiences in the UK and combines advanced storytelling and gameplay in a compact format.

In a first for the sector, the ride introduces the 'S' size layout of the innovative Gameplay Theater concept, reimagining the park's former 4D cinema into an exciting new attraction.
Developed by Lagotronics Projects and Mack Rides, the attraction introduces a brand-new format to the industry: the Gameplay Theater. Compact, scalable, and fully interactive, this ride concept offers a new blueprint for high-capacity, small-footprint dark rides that are as engaging as they are immersive.



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extra evening activities and extended offerings for overnight guests. These include live performances by the Plopsa Singers, transport services like the Plopsa Plaza Explorer train for village guests, and an expanded entertainment program in the Studio 100 Theater. Plopsa strategically placed the new family ride, Wickie's Wervelwind, next to the Plopsaland Village.

"Guests increasingly value convenience and a stress-free experience," Verellen says. "Offering packages that include reserved seats in the theater, meals, and park access allows families to enjoy their holiday without needing to plan every detail."

## Story, Design, and Delivery Meet at Parc Astérix

In France, Parc Astérix continues to develop its accommodation capacity, with a fourth hotel on the way. The 300-room hotel and convention center will have a Mediterranean theme, aligned with the Astérix and Obélix universe. The park aims to launch the hotel by late 2026/early 2027. This latest addition will join Parc Astérix's themed accommodation portfolio, which already includes the Hôtel des Trois Hiboux, La Cité Suspendue, and the four-star, 150-room Les Quais de Lutèce.

The hotels are an integral part of the park's master plan. "First, we think about the story we want to tell our guests," says Parc Astérix CEO Delphine Pons.

The project teams also work closely with the operations team to ensure that the hotels run smoothly after completion.

TOVERLAND

Campers eat lunch outside while participating in Toverland's Pop-Up Summer Camp offering.

## O's Pioneering Spirit

In France's Vendée region, there's a new sheriff in town when it comes to family lodgings. In 2024, O'Tel Park started rustling up cozy overnight stays close to O'Fun Park and O'Gliss Park. Guests can bunk in 25 stagecoaches and 25 wooden chalets in the rural setting.

"With their Far West and cowboy ambience, these original accommodations represent the second largest hotel offering in the Vendée, with 97 rooms and 133 beds," says Clément Trigatti, communications manager for the Oceano Loisirs group, which operates the themed accommodations, the leisure park, and water park. The group hopes to double the number of rooms by 2026.

## Toverland's Summer Sleepover

Campers at Toverland's Pop-Up Summer Camp can wake up to magnificent views of the park's wooden roller coaster, Troy. Toverland's owners have long harbored ambitions to add overnight accommodation to the theme park in Sevenum, Netherlands, but began modestly.

"We first launched the Pop-Up Summer Camp in 2020, during

PARC ASTERIX

Rendering of new hotel coming to Parc Asterix.

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Campers at Toverland's Pop-Up Summer Camp are treated to this view of Troy, the park's wooden roller coaster.

the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw it as a low-threshold way to test whether our guests would be interested in staying overnight near our park. The Pop-Up Summer Camp turned out to be a great success, which is why it's returning for the sixth time in 2025 during our summer event, Summer Feelings," says Tessa de Zeeuw-Maessen, Toverland's communications specialist.

Guests can choose a fully furnished ToverTent or bring their own tent, camper, or caravan. "We offer 15 pitches and 65 ToverTents for two, four, or six people. Our maximum capacity is 362 guests per night," she says.

Guests have the benefit of unlimited access to Toverland during their stay, a dedicated entrance to the park, morning meet-and-greets with Toverland characters, and entry to the Tovertuin (Magic Garden) playground before the park opens. The Summer Feelings event features extra shows, performances, and musical entertainment until the park closes at 9 p.m. Campers can also book extras such as breakfast boxes delivered to their tents.

Toverland aims to grow into a full-fledged destination resort by adding permanent accommodation to the park. "We have already submitted the zoning permit for our resort to the local municipality, marking an important step in realizing this goal. One thing is certain: a magical future awaits!" De Zeeuw-Maessen says.

## Mission Accomplished at Liseberg

A neighboring hotel is slated to open in 2026 next to the Liseberg amusement park and the forthcoming Oceana water park. Liseberg plans to work together with the hotel's owner and operator, Strawberry. The 217-room, 16-story property occupies a former print works. "This is good for the visitors, for Liseberg, and for Gothenburg," says Liseberg CEO Andreas Andersen.

This development follows the opening of Liseberg's own Grand Curiosa Hotel in 2023. At the imaginative family theme

park hotel, guests find a fantastical treasure house filled with curiosities collected by fictional Swedish adventurer Agnes Daler. Whimsical nods to Liseberg add to the hotel's charm. Guests can ride the spiral slide into the lobby and climb aboard a 1923 carousel in the restaurant.

The nine-story hotel has 457 rooms (many with five beds each, including bunk beds for children). Guests can dine at the Saluhallen restaurant, Café Agnes, and the Mei Rose Rooftop Bar & Bistro, which offers stunning views. "On a summer night, it's magical," Andersen says. The hotel's speakeasy, Compagniet, serves up cocktails.

"It's a theme park hotel with a strong storyline, but it's also a boutique hotel. It's appreciated by adults and children," Andersen says.

Liseberg was one of the first European parks to enter the hotel business, when it operated an off-site hotel a few blocks away and within walking distance from the park. Yet, the Liseberg Grand Curiosa Hotel is its first themed accommodation offering. "We wanted to build a next-level hotel more linked to the Liseberg brand and experience. And we wanted to cater to the short-break market that was growing rapidly," Andersen explains.

Liseberg's approach was data-driven. "We did very thorough market and feasibility studies," he says. Liseberg's new hotel has already proven an asset to the brand and the business. With occupancy rates reaching 100%, high guest satisfaction ratings, and average daily rates surpassing competitors in Gothenburg, the hotel is outperforming expectations, even before Oceana opens. While theme park hotels can experience fluctuating demand, Andersen expects the upcoming water park to stabilize occupancy year-round.

"We haven't operated the hotel with the water park yet. That will add another dimension and layer of complexity," he says. But his outlook is positive: "It's a good, sound business and a high-quality experience."

And the experience will only continue. Liseberg has planning permission to add at least three more hotels in the future.

LISEBERG

Themed bunk beds in a room at Liseberg's Grand Curiosa hotel.

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# Additional hotels at European theme parks continue the storytelling

## Le Pal

**Pal Lodges and Savana Reserve**
*Dompierre-sur-Besbre, France*

Offering two distinctive accommodations—Pal Lodges and Savana Reserve—Le Pal's lodging facilites immerse guests in the ambiance of the African savannah. Nestled within the Rhône-Alpes region, guests enjoy wildlife observation in comfort. Pal Lodges are set among African lakes and savannahs, offering views of animals like zebras, ostriches, and hippos, with each unit styled to compliment the serenity of nature while providing cozy, rustic lodges ideal for families seeking adventure. Savana Reserve, launched in 2021, expanded Le Pal's lodging options with 60 African-themed suites overlooking giraffes and rhinos via balconies. The rooms accommodate up to six guests with modern amenities while the hotel provides a cocktail bar, children's playground, and the Le Victoria restaurant with African-inspired cuisine in a stunning savannah setting.

*en.lepal.com/stays*

## Futuroscope

**Hôtel Station Cosmos, Hôtel Ecolodgee Futuroscope, Hôtel du Futuroscope**
*Chasseneuil-du-Poitou, France*

Located just steps from the theme park, Futuroscope's lodging offerings compliment the park in both modernity and innovation. Exclusive packages include park tickets, early access, or themed experiences tied directly to Futuroscope's immersive universe. While the 4-star Hôtel Station Cosmos transports guests into a space-themed universe, complete with sleek, sci-fi-inspired rooms and direct access to the park, the Ecolodgee blends eco-conscious design with comfort, offering cozy wooden pods nestled within greenspace. Futuroscope's original hotel, Hotel du Futuroscope, provides a sleek, minimalistic design and a convenient pedestrian bridge that connects guests to the park. Futuroscope's lodging facilities offer features such as family suites, on-site dining, meeting rooms, and wellness areas.

*futuroscope.com/en/xperiences/hotels*

## Karls

**Die Karls Bande - Das Hotel**
*Döbeln, Germany*

First welcoming guests June 1, 2025, Die Karls Bande - Das Hotel, the newest themed accommodation by Karls, expands length of stay for visitors to the heart of Saxony's leisure landscape. Located directly at the Karls theme park, this family-centric hotel merges immersive storytelling with high-end hospitality. Themed around the beloved Karls Gang, the hotel features 60 creatively designed family rooms that bring German cartoons and radio plays to life. Reversable mattresses allow guests to toggle between soft or firm bedding. Each room accommodates up to five guests and incudes private terraces. Guests enjoy complimentary day tickets to the theme park to enhance the value proposition. The hotel offers integrated

digital conveniences such as online check-in, WhatsApp concierge service, and digital check-out, streamlining operations and elevating guest satisfaction.

*karls.de/hotels/karls-bande-hotel/*

MAXIME VAN KERCKHOVEN

## Pairi Daiza

**Pairi Daiza Resort**
*Brugelette, Belgium*

Pairi Daiza—a zoological and botanical park—offers an immersive hospitality experience, with accommodations integrated into its distinct themed areas or "worlds." This strategic placement and thematic design enhances guest engagement and deepens the connection to nature, along with up close viewing of bears, wolves, deer, polar bears, Siberian tigers, walruses, and penguin species in their habitats. In the park's Last Frontier World, the 26-room Paddling Bear Hotel & Lodge offers rooms with natural elegance, rustic touch, private saunas, and sea lion habitat views. Park access is granted to hotel guests one hour before posted opening times. Newly launched in 2024, The Farm House Lodge, makes use of a renovated, historic farmhouse nestled among deer, wallabies, pigs, and more.

*pairidaiza.eu/en/pairi-daiza-resort/*

## Faarup Sommerland

**Hotel Fårup**
*Blokhus, Denmark*

Hotel Fårup is a four-star family hotel located inside Fårup Sommerland, offering a unique forest-themed experience. Guests wake up to views of the lake and roller coasters like Orkanen and Falken, with park admission and a breakfast buffet included in every stay. The hotel features 53 rooms ranging from family rooms for four guests, large family rooms for up to six, and family suites with separate bedrooms and living areas. All rooms include private terraces or balconies. Guests enjoy exclusive early access to select rides, morning and evening entry to Golf Øen, and use of the hotel's soccer field, trampolines, and playgrounds. Dining is available in three onsite restaurants or on the terrace overlooking the forest lake. Digital check-in and WhatsApp concierge services enhance convenience while nature-based experiences such as horseback riding and evening bonfires round out the hotel's offerings. FW

*faarupsommerland.dk/overnatning/hotel-faarup/*

# Viva España!

## Funworld celebrates attractions in IAAPA Expo Europe 2025's host country

by Juliana Gilling

**As Spain continues to diversify its attraction offerings, its top attractions are leaning into innovation, guest-centric design, and sustainable development. From legacy destinations such as Tibidabo Amusement Park to immersive experiences at PortAventura World, operators are evolving to meet modern expectations while honoring deep-rooted traditions. Smaller operators like Rooftop Biosfera in Lanzarote carved out success through strategic reinvestment and creative guest engagement. Across the board, Spanish parks continue to demonstrate how tailored experiences, emerging technology, and community-focused operations can make a difference.**

**Funworld spotlights how five standout destinations meet and exceed expectations.**

## Tibidabo's High Point

Perched high above Barcelona and offering panoramic city views, Tibidabo Amusement Park takes its name from the mountain on which it stands. Founded in 1901, Tibidabo is Spain's oldest park. Generations have grown up having fun at the park, which is now owned by the Barcelona City Council and managed by BSM (Barcelona de Serveis Municipals).

"Many Barcelona residents who visit Tibidabo as children return as adults with their children. It is a family park with a strong emotional connection with its visitors," says Rosa Ortiz, director of Parc d'Atraccions Tibidabo.

This cherished park offers more than 35 attractions, including classics such as Avió, the original, propeller-powered low-tech flight simulator dating back to 1928.

Tibidabo continues to evolve. "Merlí, a 52-meter-high free-fall attraction offering 360° views of Barcelona, has just launched," Ortiz says. This season, the park celebrates 20 years of its Tibiclub annual family pass with a new program of shows.

Tibidabo balances two needs: "We are an amusement park some days, and on the others, we are a city space open to visitors," Ortiz says.

By listening to guests, the park refines its offerings to enhance their experience. Their feedback has led to the Merlí ride, advance attraction opening times for the youngest visitors, and a breast-feeding room. "The new, award-winning Cuca de Llum funicular was also a very important investment, making it possible to access the park directly, quickly, and sustainably," Ortiz adds.

The park makes decisions based on four strategic axes, which are sustainability, education, solidarity, and experiences. Tibidabo has "an ambitious investment plan," Ortiz says. "We want to continue to be the amusement park of Barcelonans. We want to maintain our essence and values and continue to be the park of happiness."

*tibidabo.cat*

TIBIDABO AMUSEMENT PARK

The park's newest tower attraction, Merlí, adds to the Tibidabo skyline.

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE

Register for **IAAPA Expo Europe 2025** and attend the Opening Reception, hosted at Tibidabo Amusement Park. See more here:

## Pioneering PortAventura World

PortAventura World's managing director, Fernando Aldecoa, aims to make 2025—the park's 30th anniversary—an unforgettable year. "We want to share this special milestone with all our visitors—those who have been with us from the start and those who are yet to discover us," he says.

Innovation and sustainability are central to PortAventura World's business model. At IAAPA Honors 2025 in Rust, Germany, PortAventura World won the inaugural Brass Ring Award for Best Sustainability Program. In part, the resort took home the honor for creating a resort within the resort that welcomes more than 400 families annually who have children facing a serious illnesses.

"What makes us truly happy is making PortAventura Dreams Village a reality," Aldecoa tells Funworld. Families with children who have spent long periods of time in hospitals are given a complimentary week-long stay with access to the three parks.

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE

Participate in the IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals at PortAventura World taking place Sept. 20-21. Visit the IAAPA Events Calendar to learn more about upcoming events hosted at the park:

PortAventura Managing Director Fernando Aldecoa

> "Innovation at PortAventura World goes beyond new attractions—it reflects how we want to operate and continually improve to deliver amazing experiences."
>
> —FERNANDO ALDECOA

"Every one of their smiles reminds us why we do what we do," Aldecoa says. "Innovation at PortAventura World goes beyond new attractions—it reflects how we want to operate and continually improve to deliver amazing experiences."

Physical and digital thrills combine in the park's new immersive mixed reality experiences. El Diablo Nio is an augmented reality experience that enhances the park's El Diablo: Mine Train coaster. Visitors wearing mixed reality VR headsets will discover a parallel dimension as they journey through the Mexican mine. Hysteria in Boothill is another haunting mixed reality experience on offer.

"The attractions industry is rapidly evolving toward a future that is more immersive, technologically advanced, sustainable, and inclusive," Aldecoa says. "… AI will optimize park design, traffic flow, and operations, making visits smoother and more enjoyable." PortAventura World recently launched an AI-driven chatbot named Pawla to meet visitors' needs.

PortAventura World has supercharged its FiestAventura show for 2025, adding "an amazing drone show," Aldecoa says. The park has also debuted the Un Viaje Fascinante show. Plus, guests will find a decorated park, revamped food and beverage options, seasonal offerings, and commemorative 30th anniversary merchandise. And as the park looks to the future, it does so with sustainability in mind.

"Sustainability will become an essential pillar, with green design, zero-emission transport, and waste reduction becoming standard expectations for visitors," he adds. "Inclusion and accessibility will also shape the future, as parks develop neurodiversity-friendly spaces and adapt experiences in real time to meet diverse guest needs. Businesses will continue innovating their models, moving toward dynamic pricing, memberships, and loyalty ecosystems that foster stronger guest relationships," Aldecoa says.

PortAventura World plans to embrace these opportunities by offering experiences that combine technologies with environmental responsibility, and a focus on people. "The future of the industry is full of possibilities, and we feel ready to lead this change, providing experiences that thrill, inspire and respect our environment," Aldecoa says.

*portaventuraworld.com*

PORTAVENTURA WORLD

PORTAVENTURA WORLD

ROOFTOP BIOSFERA LANZAROTE

## Lanzarote's One-Stop Fun Spot

The island of Lanzarote is a tourist hotspot, famous for its winter sunshine and volcanic landscapes. Martin and Sarah Hancock, owners of Rooftop Biosfera Lanzarote, have created a thriving family entertainment business in the coastal resort of Puerto del Carmen.

The Hancock's opened the 2,000-square-meter facility on the top floor of an open-air shopping center in 2016. "We wanted to create something completely different for all the family to enjoy together on holiday, so the Rooftop concept was born—a range of attractions upon one roof," Martin Hancock explains. Rooftop Biosfera Lanzarote includes an open-air cinema, a daytime chill-out terrace, dinosaur-themed mini golf, a prehistoric-themed restaurant, and a 6D simulator ride.

"We evolve and improve our installations every year. This year we have added animatronic dinosaurs and new interactive screens to keep regular guests excited on their return. We have also recently opened an escape room," Hancock says. The business has expanded with themed mini golf courses in two other resorts on the island.

Success hinges on having a fantastic team, he believes. "We are constantly searching for the best staff to give the ultimate customer service experience."

Continual reinvestment in the business is essential, Hancock adds. "We always try to see things from the customer perspective. We are not afraid to try out new ideas. We love the challenge and being creative."

*rooftopbiosfera.com*

Martin and Sarah Hancock at their facility, Rooftop Biosfera Lanzarote.

ROOFTOP BIOSFERA LANZAROTE

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE

Expand your mind and become connected with specialty programming in Barcelona at IAAPA Expo Europe 2025. Safety Day, Sustainability Day, and EDUTours to leading facilities will give attractions professionals access to behind-the-scenes areas and respected thought leaders. See the full agenda here:

## Central Parques

Parques Reunidos retains a strong presence in Spain. The group's water parks, including Parque Warner Beach and the Aquopolis parks, are among the country's top summer destinations for families.

Madrid's Parque Warner Beach opened in 2014, complementing its parent park, Parque Warner Madrid. Spanning 40,000 square meters, the themed water park features iconic Warner Bros. characters. "Parque Warner Beach offers exciting water attractions for all ages. From thrilling water slides to relaxing lazy rivers and children's play areas, there's something for every member of the family to enjoy," says Diego Gracia, regional director for Spain and Italy at Parques Reunidos.

In recent years, Parque Warner Beach has undergone a transformation, elevating the visitor experience and unveiling new, exclusive attractions. Highlights have included a winning combination of

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE

Grab a bite to eat at the IAAPA Expo Europe 2025 Leadership Breakfast featuring Parques Reunidos CEO Pascal Feracci as a keynote speaker on Sept. 24. Learn more here:

PARQUE WARNER BEACH

themed water rides, Aquaman (a FlyingSaucer 45) and Black Manta (a TornadoWave 60), from ProSlide.

Parques Reunidos prioritizes enhancing the visitor experience. "We follow a data-driven strategy with a mindset of continuous improvement," Gracia explains.

Two years ago, that led to the Parque Warner debut of the multi-launch roller coaster from Intamin, Batman: Gotham City Escape. "This was one of Parques Reunidos' largest investments ever, and it is already paying off," he says. Other improvements included Pase Correcaminos (Roadrunner Pass) virtual queue system and self-service kiosks in the parks.

This summer, Parque Warner replaced the Aquaman Nighttime Spectacular with a new nighttime show, Justice League: Rise of the Penguin. According to Gracia, this "breathtaking production" seamlessly integrates drones, water projections, and aquatic choreography.

Gracia believes the strategic integration of immersive technologies and digitalization will drive the development of new guest experiences with personalized content. "Collaborating closely with IP partners will be essential," Garcia concludes.

*parquesreunidos.com*

PARQUE WARNER BEACH

PARQUE WARNER BEACH

NATURLAND

## A Natural Progression

Naturland in Andorra is blossoming under a new leadership team headed by General Manager Xabier Ajona. "We moved away from the concept of an amusement park and redefined ourselves as an outdoor activity center," explains Vicky Grau, director of marketing and communications at Naturland.

Changing the name from Naturlandia to Naturland underscored the new direction while retaining brand recognition. The rebrand reinforced the attraction's connection with nature.

"We also focused on sustainability through several actions. First, we closed the animal park, as it no longer aligned with the type of activity we wanted to offer, and we worked hard to find suitable sanctuaries for the animals. Gradually, we've eliminated motor vehicles and replaced them with electric ones. We've added solar panels over parking lot canopies to provide shade and energy. We've also removed plastic from food service," Grau says.

NATURLAND

Naturland is a year-round outdoor activity center that adapts its offerings by season. Guests can participate in leisure-oriented activities at 1,600 meters and more sports-based activities at 2,000 meters. The goal is to link the two sectors with a transportation system in the future.

The park's star attraction is Tobotronc, an alpine slide spanning 5.3 kilometers. Naturland will soon open Andorra's longest zipline (more than 600 meters long) this fall. "It will be a double zipline that allows you to descend seated or lying face-forward," Grau says.

Recent investments have added value and year-round appeal. These include the N'Boscat sky trail, the Forestline curved zipline, and the development of the Bike Center and equestrian activity. "We also opened the Borda de Conangle Mountain Lodge," Grau says.

Naturland welcomes around 120,000 visitors annually and aims to develop further large-scale activities to drive business. The center has invested in a new e-commerce platform to make purchasing easier. It has also diversified food offerings to satisfy guests. FW

*naturland.ad*

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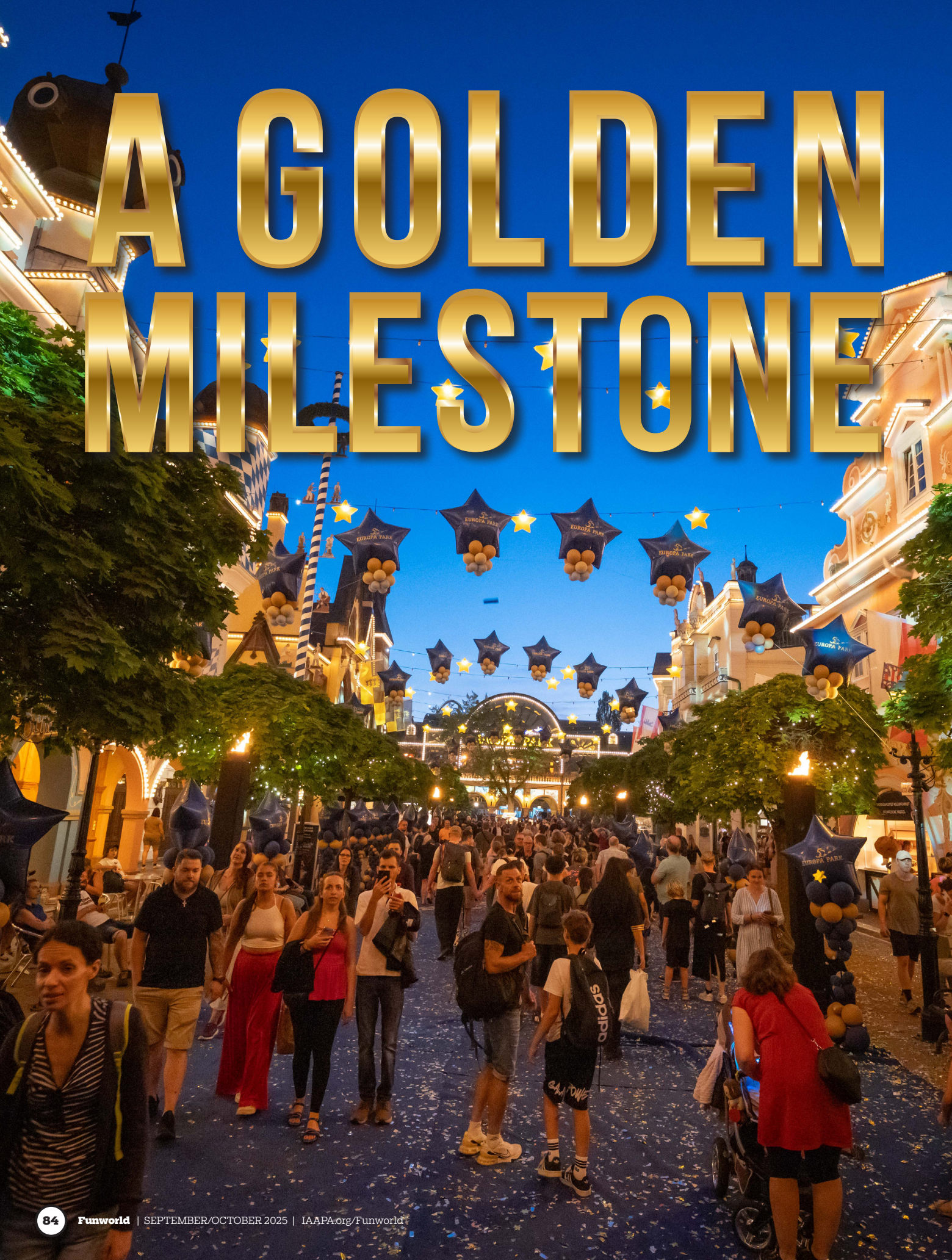
# A GOLDEN MILESTONE



# The pioneering Mack family marks 50 remarkable years of Europa-Park while planning for the future

*by Juliana Gilling*

ROLAND MACK, THE FORMIDABLE CO-FOUNDER OF EUROPA-PARK, is a difficult man to keep up with—even at age 75. After a full day of Europa-Park's 50th anniversary celebrations and media interviews, he's off again, setting the pace. Tall, tanned, and urbane, he heads for his golf cart—reputed to go faster than everyone else's—and speeds through the park he knows like the back of his hand. His next stop is a meeting about Europa-Park's latest addition, a Monaco-themed area set to open in 2026.

Despite the glitz and glamor of the day, Roland Mack, a former IAAPA chairman and member of the IAAPA Hall of Fame, remains grounded and refreshingly frank. When asked what his late father, Franz Mack—who launched Europa-Park with him—might think of the project 50 years on, he replies without hesitation: "I think he'd say it's become too big."

The Mack family name has always been synonymous with quality. Behind that reputation lies a belief that mastering all the details is fundamental to good management. For the Mack family, the challenge has never simply been about growth, but about finding the right balance: expanding enough to seize opportunities while maintaining tight control to preserve quality.

## Going For Growth

Franz and Roland Mack's tour of the United States in 1972 sparked their bold plan for a theme park. The Mack family was already renowned for its superior engineering and rides, which all started in 1780 when Paul Mack began building wagons in the German town of Waldkirch. In the 1970s, the Macks saw the potential to create a showcase for their rides and a small family theme park with strong entertainment value. They laid the foundations on the castle gardens in the fishing village of Rust. Europa-Park opened on July 12, 1975. Today, the family-run entertainment empire is still expanding.

Looking at Europa-Park now, it is hard to fathom the early skepticism that greeted the project. Both Roland Mack and his brother Jürgen, who joined the business later, recall the financial risks their family faced. News headlines predicted bankruptcy. Banks weren't willing to back the project. "My father and I were the only ones who believed in our success," Roland Mack says. The Macks put everything on the line, including the family home, to get the deal done.

They quickly proved their critics wrong. Around 250,000 visitors came in 1975, 700,000 a year later, and Europa-Park hit the million-visitor mark in 1978. Daily attendance now exceeds 20,000. The 16-hectare site has grown to 130 hectares that now includes six resort hotels and the indoor/outdoor Rulantica water park.

Watch IAAPA CEO Jakob Wahl's interview with the Mack family here:

Europa-Park is now among the world's top theme parks, offering "limitless adventures" and the opportunity to experience Europe in one day. Nearly 150 million people have visited the park since its debut, eager to experience rides like the Blue Fire Megacoaster, Silver Star, the Pirates in Batavia ride (rebuilt after a 2018 fire), and the Voltron Nevera powered by Rimac roller coaster, one of the park's newest sensations. Monaco will be Europa-Park's 21st themed area.

Europa-Park offers a stunning variety of live entertainment. There are food and beverage offerings to suit every taste and budget, including two beacons of gastronomy, Europa-Park's two-star Michelin restaurant Ammolite and the Eatrenalin experience, which fuses fine dining, dark ride technology, and immersive media. The park has expanded its seasonal offerings. The HALLOWinter event in November connects the successful Halloween event to the Christmas and winter seasons.

2019 saw the launch of the Nordic-themed Rulantica, one of Europe's biggest water parks. This second gate, costing 180 million euros, strengthens Europa-Park's year-round appeal. The park's playful mascot, Snorri—a six-armed octopus—welcomes guests to a water wonderland filled with Norse gods, trolls, and a sea serpent that swallows unwary sliders.

A footbridge links Rulantica to Krønasår, the four-star museum-themed hotel that opened the same year. Honoring adventurers, the hotel brims with exhibits, from a towering sea snake skeleton in the foyer to a replica Viking ship suspended above the Bubba Svens restaurant. The themed rooms feature museum-style displays.

With Krønasår, Europa-Park operates six hotels, that have a combined 5,800 beds. With occupancy rates above 90%, Roland Mack believes the resort must continue scaling its accommodation capacity. The park's extensive entertainment value is driving "solid growth in hotels," he says—a trend that reflects guests' desire to stay longer and experience more. "Confertainment" is also big business.

Europa-Park is expanding and rebranding its Camp Resort, the Western-themed Silver Lake City. The property will offer accommodation for over 2,000 guests beginning in 2026. A new 120-room Riverside Western Lodge will also launch next year.

The master plan provides space for an additional pair of hotels located near Rulantica. Jürgen Mack predicts that a new hotel with 250 to 300 rooms will open in the next five to 10 years.

Roland Mack (right) and his father Franz Mack at the opening of Europa-Park in 1975.

EUROPA-PARK

## The Family That Innovates Together, Stays Ahead

Managing such rapid growth brings challenges. Besides the parks and hotels, the Mack multiverse encompasses MACK Rides, MACK Solutions' creative services, MACK Animation, MACK Research, 2112 Studios, and MACK Connect—all managed under the MACK One umbrella.

As the business grows, the eighth generation of Macks are making their mark. "My brother and I are happy that we have children who want to work in the company. It's ideal when the older generation can help the next, just as our father did for us," Jürgen Mack says.

The Mack women have long played an integral role in the family business. This year, Roland and Marianne's daughter, Ann-Kathrin Mack, joined her brothers Michael and Thomas as a managing partner. She is the first woman appointed to the management board in almost 250 years. An architect who has overseen many construction projects, she aims to continue developing Europa-Park as a leading resort destination. "Whether this is your first or 50th visit, we want it to be memorable," she says. Following in his father Jürgen's footsteps, Frederik Mack will steer human resources, finance, and controlling.

Michael Mack is expanding the family's digital entertainment offerings beyond the park. MACK Magic has teamed up with Warner Bros. Film Productions Germany for its first cinema release this summer. The "Grand Prix of Europe" animated movie stars Europa-Park's mouse mascots, Ed and Edda. Guests can join the adventure in the park's Grand Prix EDventure, an interactive 3D dark ride based on MACK Rides' Gameplay Theater. "You need storytelling—books, videos, and games—so people can experience parts of the park at home," Jürgen Mack adds.

Thomas Mack is the driving force behind hospitality innovations, including Eatrenalin, the immersive restaurant that opened in 2022. Visitor numbers and feedback have been "amazingly positive," he says. Up to 160 diners a night can savor Eatrenalin's culinary delights. Tickets start at 255 euros and the menu changes regularly. The Mack family is discussing overseas expansion with investors from Asia, the U.S., and Latin America. "I am

sure Eatrenalin will go international this year," Thomas Mack says.

At IAAPA Honors 2025, he revealed a new Eatrenalin-inspired product, EatX. This dark ride dining attraction concept features the FlowDiner—a floating table with benches that carries diners through captivating worlds. "We have a high capacity of 120 people per hour for a 44-minute experience," he explains.

## Diversification Pays Off

For more than half a century, Europa-Park has steadily evolved. "We do have space in Europa-Park and the water park to grow," Roland Mack says. Rulantica's new outdoor pool with a swim-up bar opened in May. Fresh events such as the Nordic Festival of Lights at Rulantica (from January to March) are driving visitor interest.

Doubling the park's size is not Roland Mack's goal. Building parks is an increasingly difficult and expensive business, with rising costs, regulatory demands, environmental scrutiny, and limited land availability. "Each attraction is far more expensive and complicated to build now than 20 years ago," he says. Robust finances and reserves are essential.

Diversified offerings are vital, Frederik Mack believes. "Having variety—the hotels, Rulantica, YULLBE [virtual reality experience], Eatrenalin—enables us to keep guests for longer, and that helps from the revenue side. It's also important to keep up with innovation and bring new technologies into the park. We are just at the beginning of this artificial intelligence wave."

The Wild West will come to life in 2026 as Europa-Park reimagines its previous Camp Resort to become the western town of Silver Lake City, seen here in model form.

## Team Spirit

Recruiting and retaining staff is an ongoing challenge. Europa-Park is looking farther afield for its workforce and has to accommodate them. "We have about 1,500 rooms now, and I think we're going to need 2,000 plus," Roland Mack says of their employee dormitory complexes. Europa-Park aims to make newcomers feel like part of the family. Milestone investments, including the Welcome Center 75 and MACK Academy, facilitate the onboarding and training of new employees while fostering a social environment. The Europa-Park Talent Academy, founded by Katja Mack, nurtures performing artists.

Roland Mack and his family members have witnessed many events: from the entry of major players like Disney into Europe to waves of consolidation, fires, and pandemic-related park closures. Throughout, they have stayed true to their roots, listened to their guests, and focused on their guiding principles—family, quality, and innovation—to set the gold standard in entertainment and hospitality.

## Compassion by Example

Extending their commitment for developing people and highlighting the importance of wellness, the Mack family will spend the remainder of 2025 building a facility catering to families

Learn more about EatX from Thomas Mack in this IAAPA News video.

Scan to view an interactive Europa-Park timeline here:

with a child facing a life-threating illness. The new Little Heroes Children's House is a central charity project of Europa-Park that will generate good well past the resort's 50th anniversary year.

"The target group is children with cancer who are slowly returning to normal life after their serious illness. Staying with us at Europa-Park and the Rulantica Water World with their families for a week is intended to give them back their zest for life and help them find their way back to normality," explains Roland Mack.

The children's house featuring five large apartments—with each unit providing space to host a family of four—will be centered inside the resort's new Camp Resort. Each child and their family will be provided a complementary five-night stay, with admission to the theme park, indoor water park, and excursions to the Taubergießen Nature Reserve, Freiburg, and Strasbourg provided at no cost.

Retired employees of Europa-Park will serve as volunteers at the Little Heroes Children's House. The former employees will receive training that includes an education into to childhood illnesses and how to anticipate the needs of children recovering from cancer treatments.

Europa-Park developed the new facility in cooperation with Stiftung RTL - Wir helfen Kinder e.V. (an organization supporting projects in Germany benefitting children) and the German Childhood Cancer Foundation in Bonn, along with a patronage by Swiss musician and DJ BoBo.

Roland Mack believes the new Little Heroes Children's House (slated to open in 2026) is of "great importance," not only for the recovering child, but also the child's siblings and parents once they have the "great burden behind them."

Roland Mack—the heart and soul of Europa-Park—remains dedicated to his life's work, securing the family legacy for future generations. With a smile and a nod, he disappears into a meeting with Monaco's officials about the upcoming themed land. He remains relentless in his pursuit of perfection. FW

# Europa-Park Strikes Gold at 2025 IAAPA Brass Ring Awards

*Resort wins for advancements in wellness, strengthening community, and entertainment*

The IAAPA Brass Ring Awards recognizes advancement and excellence across the global attractions industry. At IAAPA Honors 2025, Europa-Park took home three Brass Ring Awards for developing programs that enrich lives.

First, the resort earned a 2025 Brass Ring Award in the Human Resources Excellence category for its modern onboarding concept centered around the MACK Academy and Welcome Centre 75.

"You always must think about your employees and how you train them and how they can grow together with you as a company. It is my deepest belief that only happy employees can be happy hosts for our guests," Frederik Mack, director of human resources, tells Funworld.

Welcome Centre 75 provides onboarding services in 11 languages, a community meeting center, and a café that's open to both employees and residents of Rust, alike.

Europa-Park also won a 2025 Brass Ring Award for the resort's commitment to health and well-being. The Feelgood Health Centre, founded by Miriam Mack, won in the category of Best Health and Wellness Program. The facility provides a wide range of health services to the resort's 5,200 employees.

ABOVE: Miriam Mack and Frederik Mack proudly pose with their 2025 IAAPA Brass Ring Awards on the IAAPA Honors red carpet.

BELOW: Matthias Reichle jokes onstage at IAAPA Honors with IAAPA Second Vice Chair Christopher Perry when receiving the 2025 IAAPA Brass Ring Award for Live Entertainment Excellence.

"We are spending so much in our marketing budget to bring guests to the park. And who is their first touchpoint? Our frontline team members," explains Miriam Mack, wife of Europa-Park Managing Partner Michael Mack. "We really must support them and make them feel good, happy, and healthy, because they are giving us their full ability when doing their job. This is the most natural thing an employer should do."

Meanwhile, in the Live Entertainment Excellence category, the anniversary stage show, "20 Years of Colosseo," received the 2025 Brass Ring Award for Most Creative Spectacular. An impressive combination of acrobatics, music, dance, and modern stage technology caught the eye of the judges. Together, Thomas Mack, Europa-Park managing partner who is responsible for entertainment, and Matthias Reichle, director of entertainment, were pleased with the accomplishment.

The IAAPA Brass Ring Awards are among the most prestigious awards in the international attractions industry. Interested in applying? The deadline to apply for the 2026 IAAPA Brass Ring Awards is Oct. 10, 2025. Visit **IAAPA.org/Awards** for categories and application details.

*—Scott Fais*

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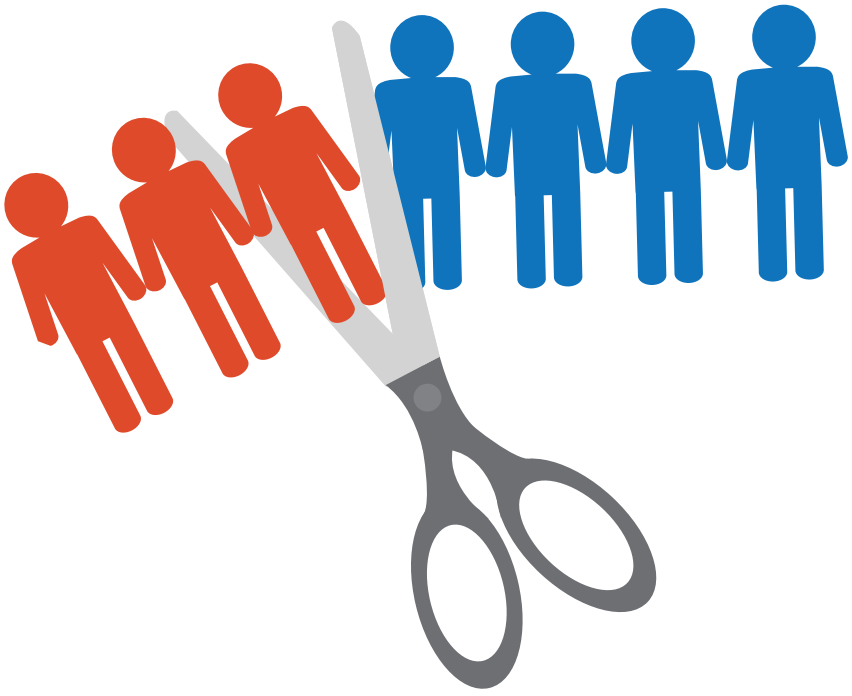

# When the Ride Pauses

## Resources and strategies for attractions professionals when navigating layoffs

*by Carly Neil*

**Carly Neil** began covering the attractions industry half a decade ago, with her love of theme parks spanning a lifetime. Her reporting on all things Disney, Universal, and beyond has reached millions of readers worldwide. Carly calls New England home, but you'll frequently spot her on roller coasters across the country. Connect with her on LinkedIn.

IN THE WAKE OF RECENT ATTRACTIONS INDUSTRY LAYOFFS, emerging and seasoned professionals alike are confronted with unexpected transitions and uncertainty about what comes next. Thankfully, in these circumstances, many organizations and individuals rally together to offer their support for those seeking reemployment.

Funworld brings valuable resources to attractions professionals looking for their next role. While the period following a layoff can be difficult to navigate, there are tools, support systems, and actionable tactics that may help pave the road to an exciting new opportunity.

### Industry Job Boards

Job board resources can serve as a great first step in the job search process. IAAPA's job board, the IAAPA Career Center, features active listings across the industry.

#### *IAAPA Career Center*

The IAAPA Career Center, available to anyone as a resource for exploring potential job opportunities, also offers tools such as free resume reviews, career planning services, and a career coaches hub—giving job seekers additional tools to support their career goals.

Applicants will find a wide range of job opportunities across attractions-related constituencies, including theme parks, zoos, aquariums, and beyond.

#### *Themed Entertainment Jobs*

Themed Entertainment Jobs provides access to numerous active job listings across the industry on their website. Updated frequently and with thousands of current listings available to browse, Themed Entertainment Jobs does not require a membership to access its database. Themed Entertainment Jobs grew from the belief that "the easiest way to help other people is to leave the door open behind you," according to Themed Entertainment Jobs founder Dave Hall.

"It is an amazing resource to find roles in the industry you maybe didn't know existed, or to find companies who aren't hiring now, but may be worth watching in the future," he says.

#### *Slice Creative Network*

If choosing the freelancing route, numerous platforms cater to the gig economy. Sites like Slice Creative Network provide jobs for those with an active membership in areas such design, show writing, and more. Once members have crafted an online profile, industry companies can search for freelancers that fit their unique needs.

Its creator, Melody Matheny, shares that she started Slice Creative Network out of necessity. "I was an art director at SeaWorld at the time, and I couldn't keep the freelancers' contact info straight, so I made myself a little website to keep track of them. Pretty soon, my fellow art directors were using it to hire as well, and then freelancers started recommending each other."

Slice Creative Network, a nonprofit organization, currently boasts more than 350 members nationwide and has hosted

more than 1,000 freelancers in its 15-year history. "There are a great many freelancers who get gigs through Slice constantly," Matheny adds.

## It Takes a Village

Aside from independent research, an entire community of peers from across the industry is ready to help those impacted by the recent layoffs. Engaging on social media platforms such as LinkedIn and X connects applicants with a wide array of job openings and organizations.

Hall recommends job seekers lean on strong industry friendships as a supplemental effort. "Reach out to former coworkers, friends from the industry that you haven't talked to for a while. Get coffee, grab a drink." Hall also recommends that job seekers reach out to connections in current positions they could see themselves in one day and start a dialogue. "Approach from a place of curiosity," Hall adds. "I have had a lot of success reaching out to folks on LinkedIn; the key is asking for something you know they can give you, like 20 minutes of their time for a phone call. Most people want to help."

IAAPA's LinkedIn page shares active job postings. To maximize reach, numerous industry leaders share these jobs with their networks on their pages. Connecting with others in the industry on LinkedIn increases the chances that the next job opportunity will be seen.

Many professionals generously provide resume reviews, mentorship opportunities, and general career advice, either at no cost or for a fee, depending on the level of services requested. Profile optimization will help link applicants to potential employers, Matheny adds. "LinkedIn is your friend," she says. "Be sure to update your profile and let it be known that you are looking for work."

Hall also suggests that industry professionals, regardless of employment status, create their own opportunities. He notes that the cyclical nature of the industry lends itself to staying vigilant.

"One of the interesting trends that I have seen, and would encourage more folks to consider, is taking the team from the project you just finished, all without work now, and organizing your own company," Hall says. "Many of the pillar companies of our industry started when a major project ended, and knowing that the industry would need those services again, they formed a company to contract out for the next major project." Hall notes that while this route is not ideal for everyone, it allows professionals to continue working as a contractor without becoming subject to the "boom and bust cycle" between major developers.

## General Advice

Starting the job search process promptly after a layoff increases one's chances of being noticed by employers. "Update your resume and online portfolio ASAP and start sending it to potential employers and people in the industry," Matheny suggests. To capitalize on this momentum, "attend any and all online or in-person networking events possible," she adds. These networking events offer opportunities to connect with other industry professionals. IAAPA's website also features a calendar with upcoming expos and events, which provide opportunities to network with a diverse range of attractions professionals.

When seeking a new role, consider leveraging professional development tools, such as IAAPA webinars and certifications, to enhance skills and expertise.

Much like individuals on LinkedIn offering mentorship, formal mentor-mentee programs can help bridge the gap to the next employment opportunity. The IAAPA Young Professionals Mentorship Program can help early-career professionals find their way forward. The emerging professional demographic may also find IAAPA's Show Ambassador Program beneficial. This program recruits recent graduates and young professionals to serve as volunteer interns at IAAPA Expo, IAAPA Expo Europe, IAAPA Expo Asia, and IAAPA Expo Middle East.

Experiencing job loss is common within the attractions world and never easy, but new opportunities inevitably follow. As Hall explains, "This industry is one of the most volatile in the world. The work fluctuates with major capital projects. We see these cycles every time a new park is built." Even so, the attractions industry remains a close-knit community—one where many are ready and eager to support colleagues impacted by recent layoffs. FW

## IAAPA Stands Ready to Support the Attractions Community

IAAPA is currently offering complimentary individual membership, valid through 2025, to members who lost access due to a recent layoff. To request support, attractions professionals should email **IAAPA@IAAPA.org** with the former company name, company email, and date of separation.

FUNWORLD DIGITAL EXTRA

**Setbacks and Bounce Backs:** Harnessing the Power of Networking

**Josh Liebman**, author and founder of Liebman Leisure Group, shares more on getting the next gig. Visit **IAAPA.org/BounceBack** for Liebman's advice on staying positive and professional when making the next career move. Connect with him on LinkedIn.

DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY

Dolly Parton reads a storybook to a group of children as part of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a program that sends free books to children from birth to age five.

# Parks Paying it Forward

## How attractions can give back to the communities they serve

*by Heather Larson*

WHETHER IT'S CALLED PAYING IT FORWARD, reinvesting, or simply extending goodwill, the message is clear: giving back matters.

For attractions, supporting community efforts isn't just the right thing to do—it's also a smart business strategy. The return on these efforts extends well beyond financial gains or job creation. Organizations that engage meaningfully with their communities often see reduced employee turnover, stronger reputations, and a lasting, positive impact that reinforces their long-term success. Funworld spoke with several operators to learn their method for successfully developing charitable initiatives.

### Providing Complimentary Admission

One of the easiest and most popular ways to give back is by donating admission tickets to local nonprofits. Hershey Gardens and The Hershey Story Museum both operate as nonprofits and have limited ways to support other organizations, says Amy Ziegler, senior director education, programs and operations at the Hershey Foundation.

"We try our hardest to provide positive experiences through complimentary tickets," she says. "This is also a great way to participate in silent auctions."

It is advised to set ground rules for who receives free tickets. In the United States, theInternal Revenue Service's regulation states that the recipient must be a charitable corporation with tax exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of their Code. In Hershey's case, the nonprofit must have a geographic focus in Central Pennsylvania, where their employees and families live and work. The last criterion speaks to the organization's mission, which must place an emphasis on causes that benefit educational and cultural enrichment.

Hershey Gardens gave away 1,880 tickets to support 470 different Central Pennsylvania organizations in 2024. Even better news, says Ziegler, was that all requests that met the requirements were fulfilled.

### Create a Foundation

Often, larger operators will form their own foundation so their facility can give back locally. With a foundation in place, an attraction can decide how its funds are doled out. Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, established a foundation first in 1986, and Dolly Parton followed in 1988 by establishing The Dollywood Foundation to serve her hometown community in Sevier County, Tennessee.

"In its early days the Foundation focused on addressing the county's growing dropout rate, but even then, the seeds were being planted for what would eventually grow into the Imagination Library that we know and love today," says Tracy Long, director of marketing and development of the Dollywood Foundation.

In 1995, Parton launched Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, the Foundation's flagship program. The initiative aims to inspire a love of reading, and sends free, high-quality books to children from birth to age five, regardless of family income.

"Now, after 30 years have passed, we're proud to be celebrating the incredible impact the Imagination Library has had on children and families around the world, with over three million free books mailed each month to children across five countries," Long says.

Dollywood supports the Foundation in several ways. Through the Imagination Library's partnership with Penguin

**Heather Larson** writes for several trade publications including Funworld. She resides in Washington State, which has very few theme parks, so she lives vicariously through Funworld. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

Random House, Dollywood brings the books to life on stage at the Imagination Playhouse—where a live show takes place. The library is also featured in the new Dolly Parton Experience, giving visitors a deeper look at the program's impact, says Long.

## Empower Your Employees

Herschend, which operates almost 50 leading attractions after acquiring the North American assets of Palace Entertainment, recently realized that only a select few, high-level individuals in the company decided where donations were made. After acknowledging this divide, Herschend decided to democratize access to giving.

"We created a new, innovative giving program that furthers our investment in our people, reinforcing our culture," says Andrea Pendleton, director of giving for Herschend. "We call it LoveShares."

LoveShares offers hosts (Herschend's term for employees) a say by allowing them to vote on the local nonprofits that make a meaningful impact on their communities. The outcome of the vote determines the amount of money donated to each organization.

With this approach, last year, more than 10,000 North American Herschend hosts had the opportunity to support more than 200 charities—mostly in their communities.

Each individual property within the Herschend portfolio determines volunteer hours, which is another way to empower staff. Allowing your employees to volunteer for a set period during working hours improves their well-being and boosts employee engagement.

## Other Ways to Give Back

"As nonprofits, we aren't in a position to back other organizations financially, but we strive to find creative ways to support our community," Ziegler says.

Hershey Gardens donates all the produce grown in their Hoop House and Student Garden to Cocoa Packs, an organization that provides supplemental food to children in need, says Ziegler.

"During 2024 we donated over 800 pounds of fresh produce," she says. "We also use the Hoop House and Student Garden to teach young students about planting seeds and growing food."

HERSHEY

Students care for plants at Hershey Gardens.

In keeping with the theme of education, the Hershey Foundation has also established two scholarship programs, titled Share the Gardens and Share the Story. This allows students from low-income school districts, which may not be able to afford field trips, to visit Hershey Gardens and The Hershey Story Museum at no cost. One of the biggest expenses for field trips is transportation, and Hershey can provide funds to offset that cost if necessary.

Other ways to pay it forward include sponsoring a local Little League team, holding a food or toy drive prior to the holidays, cleaning up the highway near you or a beach.

Pendleton says, the idea of "giving back" was built into the Herschend business by one of its founders, Mary Herschend, when she first started profit sharing in the '60s. Her profits helped ensure the stability of thousands of families, and the continued efforts honor an origin story deeply rooted in generosity. FW

DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY

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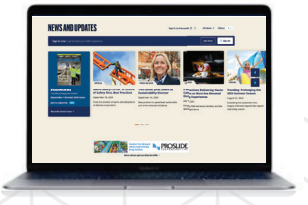


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by Peter van der Schans

# Stronger Together

From left: 2025 IAAPA Chairman of the Board Massimiliano Freddi, AAVEA (African Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions) President Mpume Mabuza, and Peter van der Schans at the AAVEA-IAAPA Africa Summit in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, it was common to say and hear the phrase, "Things will go back to normal," not realizing at the time that there wouldn't be a "normal" again. Yes, the pandemic is over, but you only have to watch one news bulletin on TV or open one newspaper to know "normal" is far away at this moment. It never really returned.

Now, we're constantly moving, evolving, and responding to changes we've never had to think about before. Whether navigating AI, tariffs, or electricity availability, the attractions industry is learning to handle new challenges as they occur.

At every IAAPA committee or board meeting, we begin with a simple question: "How are things at your park or company?" We also host live online chats where members share updates about their season—an ongoing industry conversation.

First of all, it's incredible to keep hearing these stories: the different perspectives, the contrasts between countries and companies.

I've worked in this industry since I was 16, and I've always known this spirit of sharing—talking honestly about what works and even what fails. Helping each other.

It fuels the work we do at IAAPA. But even more meaningful is the openness in these conversations.

You hear things like, "Hey, I've experienced that too," or "So I'm not alone," or "Here's what worked for us."

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That collaboration is exactly what we need now in this ever-changing world, full of new challenges and external pressures. We must keep communicating, supporting one another, and growing stronger together.

And the beauty of our industry is that we do this—naturally—for each other, and maybe even more for our guests.

The escape from reality that we offer, the emotions, the feelings, that is what our guests need. And whether you're an operator welcoming the guests, a consultant, or a manufacturer, it doesn't matter. We are all part of those beautiful moments that our guests need more than ever before. FW

**Peter van der Schans** is the executive director and vice president of IAAPA EMEA. Connect with him on LinkedIn:

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