

Indoor water park may buoy hotel's future

BY ETHAN FORMAN
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MIDDLETON — A much-awaited \$20 million water park opens today at the Sheraton Ferncroft Resort.

But there's a catch for families looking to splash around there. First, they'll need to rent a \$159-a-night room.

The resort's partners — Sage Hospitality Management, Wave Development LLC and Horizon Construction Group Inc. — are using CoCo Key, and its 84-degree year-round water temperature, to revitalize the 367-room hotel.

It's a business model first tried in the Midwest to fix up aging hotels by adding indoor water parks. The park attracts visitors in the dead of winter when most outdoor theme parks are closed. The hotel is also undergoing a \$15 million renovation this summer.

The Sheraton Ferncroft, a once sought-after business and golf resort on the Middleton-Danvers line, had fallen on hard times, said Middleton Town Administrator Ira Singer. He and Danvers Town Administrator Wayne Marquis touted the economic

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boost the resort will bring to the region.

Yesterday's preview of the 190,000-gallon, four-slide water resort came complete with short speeches by local and resort officials; Mrs. Massachusetts, Wendy Reynolds, cutting a ribbon; and a cameo appearance by Boston comedian Lenny Clark.

"It's not Water Country in that you pay a fee and you are in for a day," said Marquis, referring to the popular water park in New Hampshire. Marquis researched the project when it was in its permitting phase last year and found a key advantage to CoCo Key is the water resort's guests are free to come and go and may check out the rest of the region before they check out of the hotel.

Residents likewise saw CoCo Key's advantages. Some visitors at yesterday's preview said the room price makes CoCo Key a viable alternative to other New England theme parks for family fun. Water park admission is included in the

room rate; admissions at the other theme parks are in the \$25 to \$30 per person neighborhood.

"Everything costs," said Middleton mom Donna Peary, as her three sons splashed nearby. "This is more convenient for us. When it rains, and we have some extra money, it's not a big long trip in the car."

"It's pretty fun," said her 11-year-old boy, Matthew Peary.

Linda Ciccattelli of Rochester is a tour operator who said she has never seen anything like CoCo Key.

"You don't have to worry about the weather. You don't have to worry about the drive. It's all right here," Ciccattelli said.

Peary said she has lots of nieces and nephews, besides her three boys, and she plans to take them all to CoCo Key despite the need to rent a room.

She lives but a mile away from the resort on Peabody Street. One reason she'll be back: CoCo Key is not as sprawling as an amusement park, so she found it easy to keep track of her kids.

"I think the size of it is perfect," Peary said.

CoCo Key doesn't compare directly to places such as Canobie Lake Park in Salem, N.H., and Water Country in Portsmouth, N.H. It's smaller, it's indoors, and unlike other theme parks, it's open year-round.

However, the price stacks up.

A family of four visiting Water Country for a day has to pay \$132 (though, there are price breaks available for small children or for entering the park after 3 p.m.) Throw in a cabana rental for \$60, and CoCo Key and Water Country are comparable.

Canobie Lake Park costs less, charging \$112 for a family of four (without price breaks for small children or seniors).

Story Land in Glen, N.H., costs \$23 per person, or \$92 for a family of four. That covers unlimited rides and expenses like pet ken-



nels, strollers and parking. Families can even bring their own picnic lunches into the park, said Jim Miller, the marketing coordinator.

So what do other parks think of CoCo Key?

"I've been asked that question before," said Chris Nicoli, marketing manager of Canobie Lake Park. "This is one other element to make New England a tourist destination. ... We all complement each other."

Andy Nitschelm, director of operations at Water Country, said

being indoors is a plus for CoCo Key.

"To make us an indoor water park would make us pretty expensive," Nitschelm said of his 26-acre park. "They will be doing very well on a rainy day."

Hotels with water parks can become attractive destinations, Miller said.

"The nice thing about the indoor water park experience, wherever they are, it is a way for a hotel to sell rooms," he said.



MATTHEW VIGLIANTI/Staff photo

Michael Halloran, 7, of North Andover screams while getting soaked by a spray of water during a tube ride while his mother, Phaedra, ducks to avoid the shower at the CoCo Key Water Resort at the Sheraton Ferncroft Resort yesterday.

PARKS AT A GLANCE

COCO KEY WATER RESORT

Location: 50 Ferncroft Road, The Sheraton Ferncroft, Middleton and Danvers

Cost for admission: No general admission; \$159 to \$189 for a hotel room for a family of four; birthday parties range in price from \$29 to \$44 per person depending on the day.

Cost for a meal: Varies; \$6.99 for a hamburger combo, \$7.50 for a cheese pizza at Pizza Hut Express.

Cost for parking: Free

Season: Year-round

What you get: 190,000 gallons of water in a 65,000-square-foot indoor water park; a 321-foot-long adventure river, a 300-gallon dump bucket that tips every seven minutes from the Parrot Perch play structure, four water slides ranging in length from 286 feet to 353 feet; and a dip-in theater.

CANOBIE LAKE

Location: Interstate 93, Exit 2, Salem, N.H.

Cost for admission: \$112 – \$28 per person for a family of four, not including price breaks for spring admission, younger children, seniors or entrance

after 5 p.m.

Cost for a meal: Varies at 17 food stands, three restaurants.

Parking: Free

Season: April 21 through Sept. 23 (weekends only after Labor Day)

What you get: More than 85 rides, games, shows and attractions on 65 acres; a Castaway Island water play area with nine water slides and 150 ways to get wet.

STORY LAND

Location: Route 16, Glen, N.H.

Cost for admission: \$92 for a family of four – \$23 per person for adults and kids 4 and older. Kids 3 and younger get in free. Use of pet kennels and strollers are free.

Cost for a meal: Story Land allows picnic lunches; there are some food values: soda under \$1, popcorn under \$1, ice pops for 50 cents.

Parking: Free

Season: June 18 to Oct. 8, with weekends in the fall

What you get: A park for kids ages 2 to 12 with 21 rides such as the Polar Coaster, Bamboo Chutes flume ride; antique

cars, Dr. Geysers's Remarkable Raft Ride; a Little Dreamers Play Area; Huff Puff & Whistle Railroad, among others.

WATER COUNTRY

Location: 2300 Lafayette Road (Route 1), Portsmouth, N.H.

Cost for admission: \$132 for a family of four, with discounts for young children, seniors and after 3 p.m. entry. A one-day pass is \$33 per person and a season pass is \$70 per person. Tubes are provided free with nearly all the rides, or one can be rented for \$4.50 for use in the wave pool. Kids less than 4 feet tall get in for \$20. It cost \$60 to rent a cabana.

Cost for a meal: \$28 to \$44 for a family of four with a \$7-per-person meal deal that buys a hot dog, hamburger or Papa Gino's Pizza and a soda. A deluxe meal deal is \$11.

Parking: Free; preferred lot is \$8.

Season: June 9 to Sept. 3

What you get: A Giant Wave Pool; 15 adult water slides, including the Double Geronimo and Dragon's Den; and 10 children's water slides and Kiddie Cove area, all on 26 acres.