

Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort, Wisconsin Dells, Wis.

by Rin-rin Yu

Talk about a cure for boredom. At the Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort, kids can wander from waterpark to waterpark without ever going back down the same slide or ride twice. And for families, having the three indoor and two outdoor waterparks is more than enough to fill a long weekend.

But there's more outside the waterpark realm: an 18-hole golf course; lake with boat slips; day spa; dry-play area; and a selection of restaurants to satisfy palates of any age and taste. Waterparks are even featured at the property's two condominium complexes: a 3-acre outdoor waterpark at the Glacier Canyon Lodge and an indoor/outdoor waterpark at the Wilderness on the Lake.

Tucked into 610 acres of hills and forests in the Wisconsin Dells, what was once a 78-room hotel with a tiny indoor waterpark and outdoor pool has grown into a 1,054-room resort. This resort topped the charts of this year's "It" List for revenue, and it's no mystery why.

Despite its size, guests don't exactly feel as if they're in a huge resort. For example, "you can walk out of your patio and into the outdoor waterpark," says Joe Eck, director of sales and marketing at Wilderness Resort. Everything is "tucked into the middle of the woods." On the other side of the waterpark are towering pines and a sandstone canyon, giving the place a rustic feel with, as Eck says, "all the amenities of a major metropolitan resort."

Naturally, the staff ensures guest safety with lifeguards hired for the sole purpose of watching the water and explaining how to use rides safely. A separate attendant staff of 30 is there to answer questions, distribute towels, wipe down tables, pick up paper, and keep the waterparks clean and spotless.

Each of the resort's waterparks differs, making it seem like six

resorts in one. The Wild Waterdome holds an enormous indoor wave pool and is enclosed entirely in windows to allow year-round tanning. The 70,000-square-foot Wild West Waterpark features a five-person raft ride, while guests can sail around the lazy river in the 65,000-square-foot Klondike Kavern. The other three outdoor parks have all the typical waterpark attractions, plus a large pool and plenty of lounge spaces.

"Our guests tend to do one park one day and another one the next day," Eck says. "Each one provides a different feel." The parks might be at capacity in the peak season, he says, but they don't seem crowded due to their separate and individual offerings.

But it takes more than just having a lot of parks and rooms to be No. 1. There's a constant attention to guest service here, where waterparks and amenities are limited to those staying at the hotel. (On weekdays, when the hotel is less crowded, day passes are sold to groups).

A shuttle boat and bus take guests around to various parts of the resort. Three concierge desks are located around the property for guests to ask directions, book tickets, and make reservations. The housekeeping staff, too, is expected to be a reliable, knowledgeable resource for guests. All of this — the activities and amenities as well as a wide assortment of rooms, suites, cabins and condos — yields a 40 percent return customer rate.

What brought Wilderness Resort to the top is its drive to stay consistently new, even after 11 years in the business, according to Eck. "Every year, if we didn't build a new waterpark, we added a new attraction to build hype for our guests," he says. "Our goal is to stay at that level, to be an innovator."



Year opened: 1995
No. of waterparks: 5
Square footage: 380,000
Amenities: 18-hole golf course, day spa, fitness center, rock-climbing wall, arcade, dry-play area, laser tag