

Kalahari Resort, Wisconsin Dells

by *Rin-rin Yu*

Todd Nelson operates the No. 3 waterpark resort on the “if you build it, they will come” philosophy.

“We just have a different animal,” says the owner of Kalahari Waterpark Resorts. “It’s not about making the money because the money follows when you do a great job.”

The Kalahari is a destination resort in every sense of the word. Nelson wants his guests to feel as if they’re “getting away” in his African-themed facility, which he outfits from personal trips to South Africa.

While dining at a table with a gazelle hoof print or real warthog tusks is a unique experience, it’s a whole different sensation when playing in the indoor and outdoor waterparks. Besides its popular slides, rides, rivers and hot tubs, the Kalahari also boasts the only surfing machine in the Dells.

But one difference between Kalahari and many other resorts is that only 55 percent of its guests are families. Kalahari’s 100,000-square-foot convention center draws many businesspeople into town for trade shows or meetings during off-peak seasons. But when kids are out of school, families — hailing from Chicago to Minneapolis, and even Canada — flock in.

Running such a resort doesn’t come without challenges, though. Rising utility costs made Kalahari consider more energy-efficient means of running the resort, including large ceiling fans to push hot air down and hotel room key card systems to operate electricity. Wisconsin’s electric company also gave the facility a rebate for retrofitting. And Kalahari is adding solar panels.

Naturally, customer service plays a crucial role in the resort’s success. Nelson hires interns from the hospitality program at a nearby university, and recruits foreign students as well. The policy is to “treat everyone like they’re your grandma,” he says. “At 10 feet, you smile; at 5 feet, you say, ‘Hello.’”



Year opened: 2000
No. of waterparks: 2
Square footage: 195,000
Amenities: Spa, convention center, fitness center, dry-play area, movie theater, 27-hole golf course