TODAY’S RESORTS RIDING THE THRILL-TREND WAVE

LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE?
Ad

venture travel, defined as experiences centered on interaction with the environment, physical activity, and cultural exchange, is big business. According to the Adventure Travel Trade Association, the sector accounts for $89 billion in global spending. Sixteen percent of all departures from Latin America, North America, and Europe are for adventure travel. In addition, 26 percent of all travelers from these regions engage in adventure activities while vacationing.

The shared ownership industry has embraced the trend.

Fourteen years ago, Westgate Resorts developed its first experiential-themed resort, Westgate Smoky Mountain Resort and Spa in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The property offers a destination experience based on the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. This intent is reflected in architecture, interiors, public spaces, amenities, activity programs, signage, landscaping, and even the costumes employees wear. Guests can pursue an extensive list of experiential activities designed to entertain and educate them about the surrounding culture and National Park.

“Due to the tremendous positive response, we have used this same approach at every new property,” says Mark Waltrip, COO, Westgate Resorts. “This includes Westgate Historic Williamsburg Resort, which provides a historical experience in Colonial Williamsburg, and our timeshare dude ranch at Westgate River Ranch Resort in Lake Wales, Florida. There, many of our team members are authentic cowboys, and we deliver a unique experience that includes the longest running weekly rodeo in America.”

CHECK OUT ACCESSSTRIPS.COM. THE SITE BELONGS TO A COMPANY DEDICATED TO A BURGEONING TREND IN THE VACATION INDUSTRY—ADVENTURE TRAVEL. CURRENT OFFERINGS INCLUDE A MOROCCAN CULINARY TOUR, A SURF CAMP IN BRAZIL, A SKI TRIP IN CANADA, AND MOUNTAIN BIKING IN COSTA RICA.

Board simulators and zip-line towers are both popular choices.
Waltrip feels the formula works. His company has experienced a significant increase in timeshare sales efficiencies, rental revenues, and ancillary revenue performance in restaurants, spas, and retail outlets.

"It has been our experience that people will pay more, stay longer, and visit more often if you deliver an experience that connects them with the destination," says Waltrip. "It’s also important to note that the traditional service-based products don’t have much elasticity in pricing because the Internet has turned them into a commodity that is purchased based on price and star-rating. Experience-based products, on the other hand, have significantly more revenue potential because they are more likely to be sought after, due to the emotional connection they make with the consumer. Experiential vacationing is not a trend; it’s an evolution of consumer expectations.”

Phil Wilson, vice president of marketing for Extreme Engineering—a company that provides thrill-/adventure activity packages to resorts—agrees and has worked with Westgate at their River Ranch Resort.

"Overall innovation is always key for a positive guest experience," says Wilson. "We listen to the customers/owners—for instance, when we began working with Westgate, they were looking to have their owners more engaged in a relaxed way. What we’re calling the new norm of resorts is entertainment resort facilities that are built onsite. Many different family generations can interact and bond in this facility and do something beyond just drifting at the pool in the sun. Both adults and children enjoy zip-lines, rock walls, jumpers, and our board simulator (Extreme Air)."

Extreme Engineering has 5,000 customers worldwide and is the patent-holder on more than a dozen of its products. One of their top-sellers is an all-in-one package fun zone that you can buy in entirety or as piece-components: the “Hi-Action Adventure,” which includes zip-lines, rock-climbing walls, and surfboard-simulators.

On the developer side, Jon Fredricks, RRP, president of Welk Resorts, says their owners are increasingly looking for experiential activities both at the resort and in the destination market.

“We see this trend in the need to offer more experiences through our on-site activities team, higher utilization of these offerings, as well as in the variety and scope of off-resort experiences our owners and guests pursue,” says Fredricks. “More and more, owners want new, engaging, adventurous experiences while on vacation.”

Fredricks notes that owners still enjoy traditional activities like golf and shopping but also seek activities, such as paddle surfing, zip lining, ATV riding, kayaking, fishing, horseback riding, and scuba diving.

“Our resort activities teams have scheduled WOW Studios Animation and..."
Movie Studio Creations (where guests star in their own digital films), as well as Cinema Under the Stars, Latin dance class, WOW Comic Book Creations, introduction to Spanish, water aerobics, and catch-and-release fishing,” says Fredricks. “As the Millennial generation comes of age, they are much more interested in adventure vacations and even adventure honeymoons. Couples want to be able to experience what a local community has to offer by way of indigenous activities.”

In order to provide the offerings, resorts are partnering with local vendors to offer experiences to the guest that make the process seamless through the selling of vouchers and transportation services. Many are offering one-stop shopping through the concierge desk.

“In addition, as new facilities are developed and existing facilities are enhanced, we are looking at ways to provide a much broader experience for our guests,” says Fredricks. “As an example, we are developing a new fitness facility on property that will include a rock climbing wall.”

Ken Sharkey, CEO of Vertical Reality, a company that specializes in interactive amusement devices, places zip line projects, bungee trampolines, climbing walls, and the company’s Spider Mountain concept that is on the current “hot” list. They, too, are new ARDA vendor-members in this growing space of demand—and requests for key adventure features are coming in from all over the world.

“These are all proving to be very steady and highly sought-after product lines,” says Sharkey. “These activities occupy the kids while on vacation—and adults enjoy them very much as well!”

“There will always be time for lying on the beach and tuning out, but the seven-day vacation is no longer the norm,” says Waltrip. “We see people taking more vacations of a shorter duration, and each vacation may have a different purpose such as adventure, spa, shopping, or relaxing.”

On the Edge of Change

So, adventure travel: trend or fad?

“As the cruise lines have shown, customers will pay extra for more experiences and facilities on a ship, whether it is wave-riders or upgraded dining,” says Waltrip. “The vacation ownership industry, while being loyal to its core customer, will be able to offer vacations to a whole new market by being creative with additional experiences offered to the non-traditional timeshare customer.”

“We feel that this is not a fad,” says Fredricks. “This is a trend fueled by a youthful, healthy generation of travelers for whom fitness has become a part of everyday life. They require facilities and experiences that will compliment their daily lifestyle.”

Wilson notes that what companies like his provide is a “one-stop-shop that truly fits the American way for convenience and access to the best of all worlds. Plus, it builds families as teams and bonds them in different ways, offering key interactions that really trigger lasting memories.”

“We will continue to identify and develop new experiential themed resorts,” says Waltrip. “This is our future.”

Christina Wells is a freelance writer who has worked many years in the industry. Her e-mail is cwells40@aol.com.

Managing Risk: The Experts Weigh In

“We are seeing our clients start to add amenities such as zip lines and bike parks. In most cases, the general liability carrier would support these types of activities with the right safety procedures/manual in place. A risk management program that includes risk controls and claims handling is key for minimizing your risk.”

—Zachary F. Brandau, Vice President, Rutherford (A Marsh & McLennan Agency LLC Company)

Dave Waller, founder of Legal Aspirin notes the following, from a legal perspective. “The first step in adding any activity to your resort program is to make sure that you have adequate coverage. There is a tendency for some to think that is all you can do, so operators may ignore other prophylactic steps they can take. From a lawyer’s perspective, there is value in the operator crafting a meaningful release of claims, legally referred to as an Exculpatory Clause—to make sure that each participant executes it prior to engaging in the activity.”

He adds: “In fact, a 2012 Florida case, Hackett v. Grand Seas Resort Owners Association, confirmed that these releases are enforceable ‘to the extent that the intention to be relieved from liability is made clear and unequivocal,’ with language so clear and understandable that an ordinary and knowledgeable person will know what he is contracting away.”

“Two tips from that court in this regard:

• If the intent is to shield the operator from persons seeking compensation for injuries caused by negligence, the better practice would be to use the word ‘negligence’ or ‘negligent’ in the release. Words like ‘accident’ are ambiguous and lack legal meaning.

• Be precise about who is being released—it is acceptable to use defined terms like ‘management,’ so long as the person signing the release can reasonably identify who ‘management’ is.”