

2015 WATER PARK ISSUE

Skiing Gets a Lift

Camelback Resort embraces wide range of attractions—including a new indoor water park—to become a year-round destination

by Prasana William

It's a balmy 84 degrees and the gentle crash of waves mingles with the upbeat music in the air. Folks order their first round of drinks at the swim-up bar and kids on boogie boards test their mettle against the current. Over a plate of fresh sushi and fruit, the view is postcard perfect. And through the windows, the foggy Pocono Mountains rise in the distance. No, we're not in the tropics. We're in Tannersville, Pennsylvania—the ski town home to the new Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia Indoor Waterpark.



Camelback
Resort added
Camelback
Lodge and
Aquatopia
Indoor
Waterpark
to create a
four-season
destination.

CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPA INDOOR WATER PARK

When the temperatures drop, the Pocono Mountains come alive. Skiers and snow enthusiasts from all over the northeast United States fill this winter wonderland with a frenzy of downhill activity from December to March. But Camelback Resort is cranking up the heat and extending peak season with the addition of its new lodge and indoor water park. Embracing a trend popping up across the world, this 52-year-old ski resort is capitalizing on the seven months outside of prime snow sport season by adding elements from other parts of the attractions industry. Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia is the largest project in the site's history as an attraction. The project, which opened in summer 2015, boasts a 453-suite hotel, 125,000-square-foot indoor water park, family entertainment center, restaurants, spa, and conference facilities—all located at the foot of the great Camelback Mountain.

Open year-round, Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia complement the resort's seasonal outdoor amenities and make the area a destination no matter the weather.

A Chilly Start

What happens when an experienced developer and his col-

lege pal decide to build an indoor water park in the heart of the Pocono Mountains? Ken Ellis, president and CEO of Aquatic Development Group (ADG), and his business partner, Art Berry III, set out to do just that and came away with a ski resort on their hands, instead. A few tweaks (and 10 years) later, the new Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia are poised to be the largest ski-in/ski-out indoor water park hotel in the United States. Funny what can happen with a decade to brainstorm.

Ellis and Berry in 2004 hatched the idea of building an indoor water park and lodge at a ski destination. Berry grew up in the Poconos, and the Camelback Mountain ski area seemed the perfect fit for their idea. Ellis' ADG had built the outdoor water park, Camelbeach, when the then-owners of Camelback Mountain ski area wanted a two-season attraction. He approached them with a plan: Berry and Ellis would provide the development team, if they provided the land. It seemed a surefire hit based on Ellis' interaction with the owners, but he never saw their response coming.

"[One of the owners] at the time said, 'Boys, I'm 71 and I'm the youngest of my partners, so why don't you find a way to take us out and you do what you want,'" says Ellis,



WHAT IS CAMELBACK RESORT?

Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia is the latest, and largest, addition to Camelback Resort's many outdoor amenities, including:

◀ **Camelback Mountain:** The skiing and snowboarding facility of Camelback Resort is known as being a great place to learn the sports and a challenge for experienced participants.

▶ **Camelbeach:** This outdoor water park is the biggest in Pennsylvania and is built on the ski slopes. In the winter, the lazy river and other attractions are filled and buried beneath several feet of snow so skiers can glide right over them and to the base lodge.

◀ **Camelback Mountain Adventures:** Ziplines, tree top obstacle courses, and the only alpine coaster in the state provide an adrenalinizing perspective of the mountain's woodland.

▶ **Camelback Snowtubing:** With 42 lanes for tubing, this attraction is the largest snowtubing hill in the United States.



PHOTOS: CAMELBACK RESORT



with a laugh. “We switched gears and by June of 2005, Art and I were the proud owners of a ski area and outdoor water park.”

Within the first year, Ellis and Berry began the planning process for the lodge and indoor water park, but the recession of 2008 made a project of this size untenable. The lodge and indoor water park dream that started it all was shelved, and the partners found themselves facing a learning curve. Though he’d worked on more than 100 water parks to that point in his career, Ellis had never operated one, and neither partner had run a ski area.

The intervening decade became an opportunity to learn the business of running a resort. “We renamed [the area] Camelback Resort, and over that time really worked on making it feel like a resort, from a guest experience standpoint,” says Ellis. They made capital improvements to the existing ski/snowboarding/snowtubing facilities and outdoor water park, upgraded the food and beverage offerings, and added Camelback Mountain Adventures—an outdoor activity park. “We knew when the hotel came on board, it wouldn’t be a stretch for someone to think of this as a four-season resort, instead of just a ski area or water park,” says Ellis. “We had the time to do that.”

In 2012, the indoor water park resort plans came off the shelf. With a few modern changes, and a new ownership partner in Stand Rock Hospitality, Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia opened in June 2015.

An Attraction for All Seasons

“This concept can be better associated with a Western-style ski resort. It’s a four-season experience out there,” says Jeff Lococo, executive vice president and general manager of Camelback Lodge. “The whole styling and the feel of the resort, and the scale, are similar to what you’d find in Colorado. And then you add the indoor water park component; this accommodates skiers, adventure park-goers, and water park guests both outdoor and indoor. We have a state park at the top of the mountain. You can hike, you can fish. It’s truly a destination mountain resort.”



CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPIA INDOOR WATER PARK

Camelback was built 60 feet away from the base of a ski lift to accommodate guests in the winter, and provides easy access to the other attractions on site. Guests can visit Aquatopia with proof of admission to the ski facilities, the outdoor water park, or adventure park. Other ticket packages provide further incentive to extend a day trip to the ski slopes or outdoor water park into a longer stay. Says Lococo: “You can ski and surf in the same day.”

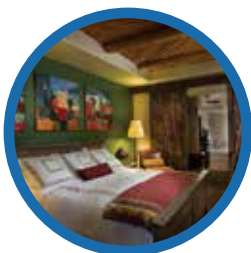
CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPIA BY THE NUMBERS



\$163 million
spent on Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia—the largest development project in the history of Camelback Resort



170,000 square feet
of wet and dry adventure activities



453 guest suites
decorated in mountain modern style



84 interactive elements
on “Kartrite’s Quest” interactive play structure



13 slides



Aquatopia features 125,000 square feet of water-based activities including a FlowRider, wave pool, children's play area, and swim-up bar.

cess in its indoor water park lodge Wilderness properties (see sidebar for more information), and Lococo and Ellis both believe it is an established trend; they feel Camelback's model provides more ways to satisfy the diverse interests of families.

"The average person isn't going to ski for six hours, so [a trip to Aquatopia] is doable. If you come in the morning and ski until noon, then go into Aquatopia and relax. We expect we'll get quite a bit of play that way," says Lococo. "People will bring their bathing suits and their skis."

Aquatopia was built larger than necessary for the amount of guests the lodge could hold. "We could've gotten away with 80,000 feet for 450 rooms," says Ellis. "We wanted to make sure the guest experience was second to none. Even when we're full at the hotel, we're not on top of one another—that was important."

The finished product includes seven pools, 13 water slides, an underground lazy river, and a first-of-its-kind family raft ride all under a Texlon ETFE system roof. The transparent roof is made of pneumatic cushions bound by foil in a series of layers, based on thermal, solar control, and visibility factors. "It truly feels like you're outdoors. That's what the whole indoor experience was supposed to be," says Lococo. "You don't have the wind, but the sun goes through the clouds and you feel the heat of it." The special roof also helps reduce the din created in indoor water parks by allowing sound to travel through its material rather than reverberating back into the park.

Enclosed slides maintain the interior temperature, as well, despite the fact that the majority of the tube travels outside the building. Though built to sustain laying snow, the slides stay warm by pulling in the heated air from the water park with the flow of water.

The slide tower twists through the upper mezzanine of the water park. A tangle of colors and one large Venus flytrap, the mix includes 13 slides. Snaking across the slide structure, "Storm Chaser," the water-based coaster, is the longest

A Water Park in Ski Country

If lodging helps lengthen visits, the indoor water park helps ensure guests with varying tastes enjoy their extended time.

According to Ellis, interest in skiing in the United States has plateaued and the ski industry is trying to maintain the enthusiasts they have any way they can. Adding an indoor water park has increasingly become a solution to this problem. Stand Rock Hospitality has seen its suc-



8 stories of accommodations, attractions, and meeting space



7 pools including a wave pool, indoor/outdoor spa whirlpool, lazy river, and toddler pool



3 on-site, full-service restaurants
Hemispheres family dining, Neptunes lobby bar, and Trails End Pub & Grille ski-in/ski-out restaurant



1.5 acres of Texlon roof over Aquatopia—the largest installation in North America



1 suit of armor

PHOTOS: CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPA INDOOR WATER PARK

uphill ride of its kind in North America. The slide is a WhiteWater West Master Blaster and stretches 756 feet, with both enclosed and open portions taking five drops and four curves. Another pioneering attraction is the “Venus Slyde Trap.” This family raft ride combines a serpentine slide, bowl feature, and WhiteWater West’s Manta wall ride, and looks like the great open maw of the hungry plant.

Aquatopia is built on three levels. The lowest is below grade and where you’ll find “The Lost River,” a dark lazy river ride. Board through the zero-depth entry of a black-lit cavern and get ready for a different kind of river. The covered portion of the ride features LED lighting effects and jungle theming, while the daylight section opens with a 60-foot waterfall.

The lodge and indoor water park as a whole are extensively themed after the fictional voyages of world explorer Kartrite Van Der Berris. Snowcapped glaciers rim the “Great Ka-na-gawa Wavepool” and a Beaver Float Plane, presumably used for the gentleman’s travels, is perched atop the adults-only swim-up bar, Flyboys.

The ride mix allows for participation at your own pace. With cabanas, at additional cost, and chairs throughout, there are plenty of quiet spaces to relax. A massive indoor/outdoor hot tub requires adult supervision for children and stays calm. The FlowRider Double also allows for a break from the action. “[It’s] just as much a participation amenity as a spectator experience,” says Pete Helland Jr., managing partner of Stand Rock Hospitality. “That’s an essential ingredient to round out the amenities in the indoor water park.”



GOING 365-DAYS STRONG

Turning a ski attraction into a year-round destination is no easy task. The team at Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia had a two-season property to build on, but still faced challenges in accommodating a 365-day resort. Here are a few of the lessons learned for those considering adding attractions:

Evaluate Your Location

“A lot of the ski areas are two to four hours from a metropolitan hub. People will travel that far to ski,” says ADG’s Ken Ellis. “For a standalone water park, they’ll travel an hour and a half—tops. Put an outdoor water park in the ski area and you still need to be near a pretty good population density.” Take a good long look at

your location before determining what kinds of attractions would work.

Also consider nearby accommodations. It’s not always necessary to build your own hotel, if there are plenty of beds nearby.

Keep Multiple Generations in Mind

“We wanted to hit as many age groups as possible. It’s always easy to get the 10 and under crowd, but how do you do for the teenagers and adults? We do have skiers who come just to ski and we have couples and college kids and 20- to 30-year-olds who want to come and use the facilities. We designed it to be more sophisticated,” says Ellis. “We have all the natural light and the lighting

at night—the mood changes. We weren’t short on putting bars in the place.”

Just off the lobby is a prime example of the care taken to appeal to adults. Neptunes is a cocktail bar that serves sushi and small plates with a view of the water park. “I wasn’t sure Neptunes would work because these are generally family style resorts,” says Lococo. “If we were truly going to be a full-service resort, appealing to all age groups, then the bar concept would work. If we were strictly parents with young families, the bar concept doesn’t work. [Here], it works.”

Neptunes has received a lot of attention from the adult crowd—locals come in for a nice dinner,



CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPA INDOOR WATER PARK

"Venus SlideTrap" is a family raft ride that combines a serpentine slide and bowl feature.

A Rock-Solid Partnership

Camelback Resort partnered with Stand Rock Hospitality to bring Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia to life. Wisconsin-based Stand Rock Hospitality was a pioneer of the indoor water park and hotel concept. Partners within the company helped develop Wilderness Resort in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, the largest indoor water park resort property in the United States. Nicknamed the "Water Park Capital of the World," Wisconsin Dells experienced a boom in indoor water park activity in the mid-'90s. Local owners covered outdoor water park features to capitalize on spring break—a season typically too rainy or cold to attract guests. Stand Rock Hospitality's partners bring a wealth of industry knowledge to the company from previous experience developing and operating Wilderness in Wisconsin Dells and owning/operating Noah's Ark in Wisconsin Dells. They currently own and operate three properties: Camelback Lodge & Aquatopia Indoor Waterpark in Tannersville, Pennsylvania; Wilderness at the Smokies in Sevierville, Tennessee, and Hampton Inn & Suites in West Allis, Wisconsin.



CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPA INDOOR WATER PARK

The owners, from left: Ken Ellis, Pete Helland Jr., Pat Helland, Tim Lucke, Tim Gantz, Art Berry III.

"We like to go to locations that are already well-established, well-recognized family destinations," says Stand Rock Hospitality's Pete Helland Jr. "I think it's only natural we'd come together and join forces to develop Camelback Lodge. The Camelback region, as a whole, is very popular as a destination. We're building off that popularity and reputation to redefine family vacation in the Poconos."

empty nesters treat the hotel like a bed and breakfast, and ladies lunch there. A spa and conference center round out the offerings for adults not toting kids.

Rebrand and Re-educate the Market

"You have to go through a brand relaunch of the destination," says the Lodge's Jeff Lococo. "We did here. We shortened the name from Camelback Mountain Resort to Camelback Resort and we put the mountain in our positioning. The reason we did that was because Camelback Resort is now a full-service, 365-day destination. The accommodations are the game changer. It takes more than launching the hotel and Aquatopia

to the market the place—you have to relaunch the brand. Camelback was primarily viewed as a day-in/day-out ski resort and adventure park, and Camelbeach, a day-in/day-out water park. Now, you can take your time."

Both Ellis and Lococo stress the importance of educating your audience on the new opportunities at your resort. Camelback focused on guests familiar with the brand in the nearby Philadelphia and New Jersey markets.

Adjust Staff Culture

Stand Rock Hospitality and Camelback Resort staff partner to manage the lodge and indoor water park. When the new attraction opened, a culture shift was needed to success-

fully merge existing and new staff. "The biggest challenge is changing the mindset of being a day entertainment facility, to being an overnight facility," says Lococo. "That mentality has to change everywhere. It's been a great experience. All the employees who have worked at the mountain for years have embraced the overnight experience."

Camelback integrated the new management team for the lodge into existing meetings, employee lunches, and staff events to help start a dialogue between colleagues who had the same job function in different areas of the resort. Staff was also trained to talk intelligently about all parts of the resort to guests and answer their questions.

Staying Dry

Family entertainment center elements are just as important as the wetter fun. “The indoor dry play is a function of how the industry has evolved,” says Helland. “Either kids get tired after a long day in the water park and are looking for a second option of things to do in the evening; or, sometimes young kids are scared of the water and need something else to do. We started to see that in our comment cards from our guests. It’s practically a requirement now, as you begin to program spaces in new indoor water park resorts.”

The upcharge dry-play area features an arcade, paint-your-own pottery, a kids’ spa, laser tag, a rock-climbing wall, mini-golf, a ropes course, and more. Some of the programming is meant to mirror the adventure park attractions—providing an alternate in the winter and encouraging guests to engage with the larger scale versions outdoors in the summer.

Trail’s End restaurant, one of three dining options on site, was also designed to work differently depending on the season. In the summer, it’s a charming bistro with a patio at the base of the mountain. In the winter, however, it’s a ski-in restaurant with outdoor heated seating, located at the end of the high-speed lift.

Blazing a New Mountain Trail

This December, Camelback Lodge and Aquatopia faces its first winter season. Will the skiing crowd embrace the new set of amenities awaiting them? Helland is confident they will. “When the indoor water park concept started to take root in 1995, the economic impact in the [Wisconsin] Dells area tripled. If it’s anything like we’ve experienced in the past, and we certainly think it’s going to be, it’s going to have a tremendous impact in the region over time,” he says.

Ellis waited 10 years to see his dream come to life, but the whole experience boils down to the same priority he puts on every project. “One of the most rewarding things in this business for me is when you open something and you see all the families come running in,” he says. “You see the amusement and joy and the family experience. Yes, it’s a business and it’s about generating revenue and all that stuff, but at the end of the day, we’re providing memories for people and that’s pretty neat.” **FW**

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The facility includes a spa for kids, where services like manicures and pedicures are available.

PHOTOS: CAMELBACK LODGE AND AQUATOPA INDOOR WATER PARK



A swim-up bar is one of the many elements that cater to adult guests.



The lazy river features a covered dark section, lit by LED.