

There's a Lot of Stuff Going On in the Campground Industry



David
Gorin

It is always interesting to note that a healthy economy and a healthy industry always attract innovation. So it goes in the RV park and campground business. As the RV industry continues to expand, as campgrounds see growing occupancies and rising revenues, industry thought leaders are on the cutting-edge — figuring out how to capitalize on the prosperity and move forward in new directions.

A New Name Enters the Park Business

An old buddy of mine, **Ed Mayer**, the founder of **Elite Resorts** with several parks in Florida, is teaming up with **Guy Harvey Outposts** to create a new destination resort on Lake Okeechobee in Florida. Not familiar with Guy Harvey Outposts or Guy Harvey? Harvey is well-known for his dramatic paintings of wild fish and as a conservationist focused on conserving the ocean, lakes and rivers and all species of fish. Guy Harvey Outposts are destination resorts and activity centers for water sport enthusiasts. They are located in Florida, the Bahamas, the Galapagos Islands, the Dominican Republic and Panama.

The Guy Harvey Lake Okeechobee Outpost Resort will feature a marina, a resort area and two sections for an RV resort. The plan also includes a 75-site park model section and about 130 cottages of varying sizes.

Aside from Disney's Frontier Campground, I can't think of another major national hospitality and outdoor adventure brand to put its name on an RV park and campground business. Congratulations to Ed Mayer and the leadership at Guy Harvey Outposts for introducing such a widely recognized and respected brand to the park industry.

CalARVC Adds Spanish and Portuguese to Website

In what I believe is a first for a state association online directory, the California Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds (CalARVC) has added special sections in Spanish and Portuguese to its Camp-California.com on line guide to camping in California.

The new language sections serve several purposes. First and maybe foremost, since many parks now offer cabins and other rental units, the market for occupancy is vastly larger and reaches into new segments of the population. In California, the large Hispanic population is a rapidly-growing market for these rental units among a segment of population that may not own an RV.

Secondly, the languages also recognize the growing market from South America, especially Brazil where Portuguese is the language of most of the population. Making the information available online for both RV renters and road travelers from that very large country is a step in the right direction.

Over the years, I've seen some parks publishing rack cards or brochures in French, particularly in Florida where the French Canadian business is substantial, or in French and German in areas like Orlando,

Miami, Las Vegas and similar destinations popular with tourists from those countries who often rent RVs for their U.S. trip.

Depending on your location and your desire to expand your markets, considering multilingual brochures or sections on your website may be a good strategy.

Zip Lines, Rope Courses, Climbing Walls — the Next Waterpark?

In the last five years or so there appears to be a growing interest in outdoor adventure attractions — zip lines, rope courses, climbing walls and so forth. At first glance, these attractions seem to a natural for campgrounds — more so than laser tag, waterslides and game rooms. At least they are outside, the participants are active in nature, and anyone can enjoy the experience without any special physical abilities or skill. And the cost of an adventure layout may be more reasonable than a water park.

So, my observations on these adventure attractions:

First, a number of stand-alone independent businesses offering outdoor adventures have sprung up in tourist areas that lend themselves to these activities. I've seen them up and down the East Coast, mostly in forested areas like Hocking Hills, Ohio, the Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge area in Tennessee, the Lookout Mountain area in Georgia and Alabama, and in areas around Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Entrepreneurs like campground owners have invested heavily in these stand-alone businesses. If there's an adventure park near your campground, is it wise to offer your own or are you better off cross-promoting with your neighbor who already can serve your

customers?

Second, beyond the cost of installing the adventure layout, there are many ongoing operating expenses that need to be budgeted. Significant staffing may be required in order to properly monitor these activities, inspect and maintain the rides and ensure that people of all ages are safe. And on the regulatory side, in many states even a rope course is subject to rigid inspection and maintenance standards imposed by the same regulatory agencies that oversee amusement parks. That opens up a whole new layer of rules and regs. And, you should always talk risk with your insurance professionals.

Third, park owners are already in a multitude of businesses — the hospitality business, the utility business, the retail business, food service, the entertainment business, the storage business and a variety of other things park owners are doing these days. You should always think carefully before venturing out into another new business.

My bottom line on these activities is that I do think these types of amenities will continue to grow, but likely at a cautious slow and steady pace. I would encourage owners to partner with another provider in the area rather take on what is really another business. In my way of looking at these things, water attractions are still the No. 1 recreational activity that kids and parents look forward to.

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