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Families flock to Pirates Cove

Freeport welcomes first Bahamian theme park

BY CATHERINE MORRIS

In 2011, a group of Bahamian investors came together with a single vision—to create The Bahamas’ first theme park. Six years on, Pirates Cove Water Theme Park is celebrating its first year of operation, and president and CEO David Wallace says business is booming at the Grand Bahama facility while plans for its expansion are already underway.

By end of summer 2017, the park’s owners hope to have a two-tower zipline in place alongside the sprawling water park, which features a floating obstacle course in the sea, complete with monkey bars, a climbing wall, a swing, a trampoline and other fun diversions.

The park prides itself on being a family destination and provides plenty

of options for both parents and kids. There is a supervised playground area for younger children, kayaks, jet skis, banana boat tours, powerboat trips and jet packs.

On land, the park includes lounge chairs, segway tours, beachside massages, plenty of dining options and the Blackbeard Tree Bar—a bar built around a 100-year-old, 60 ft tall fig tree.

Wallace says the outside deck has become one of the most remarked upon features of the park. “The tree creates wonderful shade. People can’t believe we built this bar around the tree. We wanted to promote things built by Bahamians for tourists and locals alike.”

There are three restaurants at the park; one serves traditional American fare, another offers snacks, such as wings and pizza, and a Bahamian eatery serves up conch and other seafood dishes.

Admission to the park—currently open five days a week—is \$3 and includes complimentary shower facilities, Wi-Fi and use of kayaks.

A community effort

Pirates Cove attracts a wealth of visitors, and is equally popular among tourists and Bahamians. Events are held to cater to both.

The Poker Run boat race was held in summer 2015 and brought in more than 2,000 guests to the park, says Wallace. Special activities are also held during the Spring Break season, as well as celebrations to mark Labour Day and other Bahamian public holidays.

Wallace believes that a successful venture must involve the local community. It’s why Grand Bahama vendors have been brought onboard to provide services for the park’s guests, including hair braiding, authentic local souvenir stalls and made-to-order conch salad.



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The park has 15 full-time employees and between 12 and 15 vendors. Local taxi drivers have also been key to the park's success, helping to get the word out and encouraging tourists to visit, says Wallace.

Bahamian owned

The idea for the park first struck Wallace several years ago when he was visiting Antigua with his family. Wallace's younger cousin tried, and failed, to persuade him to take a zipline tour.

Although Wallace wasn't interested in trying the zipline, he was impressed by its popularity and how it made the most of the natural environment. "They took the natural landscape, these big forests, and had people zipping from one tree to the next. I said, why do we not have that in The Bahamas?"

Intrigued by the idea, Wallace looked for investors to help make his

vision a reality. He brought together a diverse group of Bahamians under the banner of Arawak Adventures, the company formed to operate the park.

Each investor offers different expertise and experience. The eight principals include landscape architect Ivan Cartwright; engineer Wendal Grant; financier Clarence Wallace and accountant Philip Galanis. Each invested \$50,000 in the project but Wallace soon realized that additional funding was needed. He took the company public, offering 25 per cent of Pirates Cove on the market. The offering attracted 16 Bahamian shareholders and raised around \$1.1 million.

Today, Wallace says he is proud of the unique ownership structure of Pirates Cove, and Bahamian entrepreneurs should be encouraged by what his group has been able to achieve.

"The way Bahamians can move forward is to pool our resources. I am proud that I was able to pull together average people who worked hard for their money, saved up and pooled together to make this project work," he says. "If Bahamians have a wonderful idea they need to sit down and think of other Bahamians that they can share it with. Get people to buy into that vision. There is no reason why we cannot find good opportunities out there."

Planning for the future

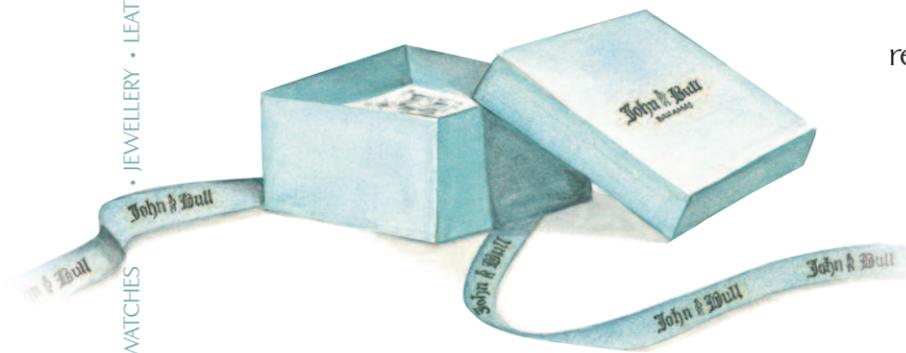
Wallace has ambitious plans for the park. He originally planned to launch the theme park in Nassau but found the approvals process in the capital too slow. But Wallace says he has not given up on taking Pirates Cove to New Providence.

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Kayaking fun

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In the long term, Wallace wants to open a Pirates Cove in downtown Nassau, within walking distance of the cruise ship terminal. However, for the moment, the team has its sights set on expanding the current facility with the zipline's first two towers set to come on stream this summer.

Eventually, Wallace wants to see six towers at the site. Each will have a distinct theme to highlight The Bahamas' "colourful history," he says.

The first tower will tell the story of The Bahamas' earliest inhabitants, the Arawak Indians. The second will focus on the swashbuckling pirate era and the third will highlight Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the islands. The fourth tower will focus on the colonial era of British rule and will connect to the fifth

tower by a suspension bridge. The fifth and sixth towers will tell the stories of Bahamian Independence and the work of the Grand Bahama Port Authority, respectively.

Once the ziplines are up and running, Wallace also hopes to add a nighttime zipline experience and offer packages tailored to specific areas of the park. He also wants to add thrill rides, including a pendulum-type swing that will propel visitors 75 feet into the air.

This constant upgrading of the park's offerings is vital to growing the business, he says. "It is important to reinvent your wheel. We have a lot of return visitors and when they come back they want to do something they've never done before. We have the opportunity to keep developing

this concept. Grand Bahama needs something different and something sustainable. It is really wonderful for the island."

Rebuilding

Construction began on the park in August 2015 and it opened to the public in June 2016. The owners had hoped to launch the zipline as soon as possible but, in October 2016, Hurricane Matthew swept over the island and, like many business owners, Wallace and his partners found themselves scrambling to repair the damage and recoup their losses.

"We were damaged badly by the hurricane. We were battered and bruised," says Wallace. "We were able to save some things but we had to go back and restore others and that takes



Breaking ground at Pirates Cove

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time and money. It was a challenge [but] we were able to put the park back in reasonable order."

Along with much of Grand Bahama's tourism sector, Pirates Cove was forced to close. It reopened just a few weeks later and Wallace already has plans to create an exhibit to memorialize the hurricane and tell the story of Grand Bahama's recovery.

He is confident that Grand Bahama's tourism sector can rebound and looks forward to welcoming even more business in 2017.

His goal is to see 1,700 visitors a day come to the park, and is eager to give the zipline a try once it is installed. "The proudest moment for me will be when I get the first zipline tower up and I see someone zipping down it." 🙌



Investors and dignitaries celebrate at the park's official groundbreaking.

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