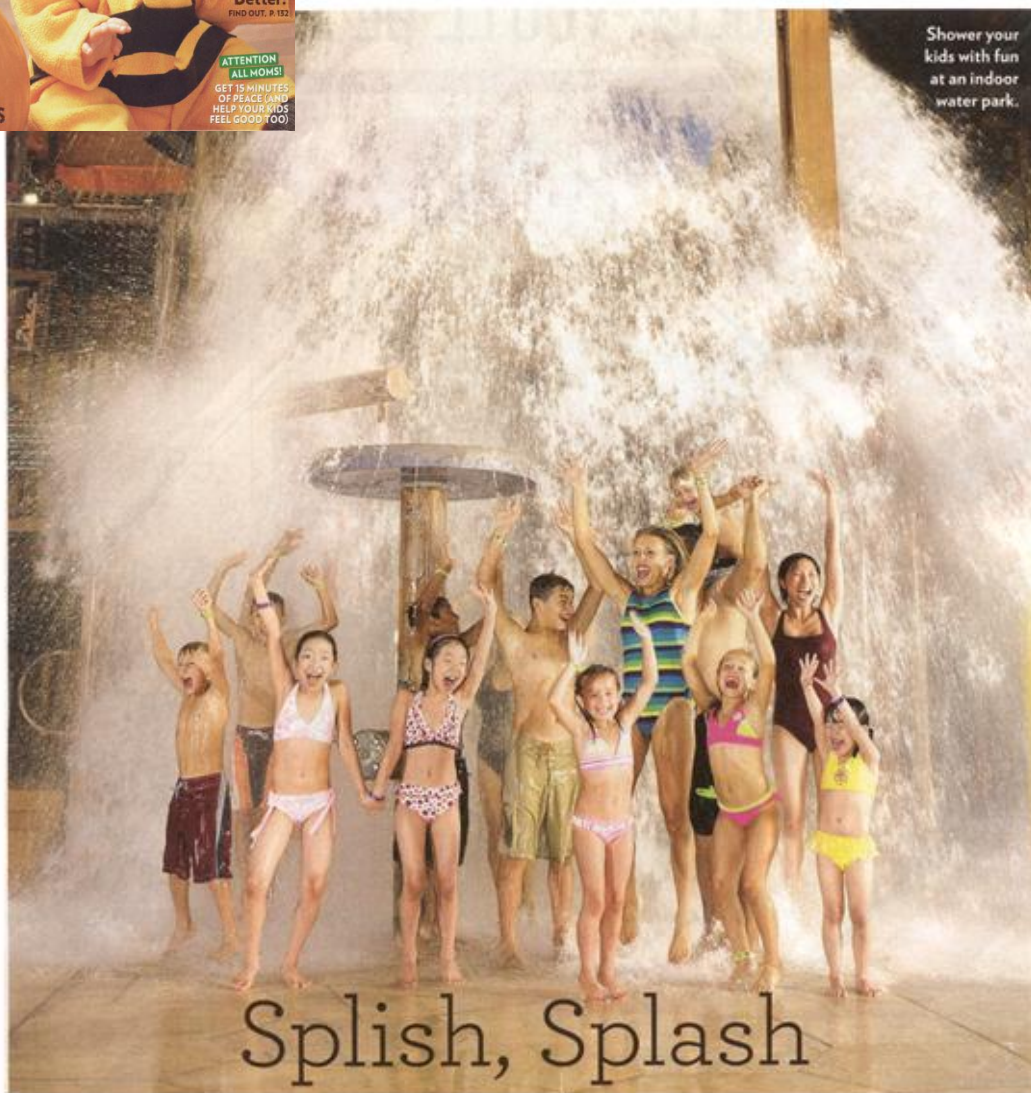




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Show your kids with fun at an indoor water park.

Splish, Splash

Fancy sprinklers, winding water slides, and a wide selection of swimming pools make indoor water parks a great spot for a family vacation all year 'round.

BY KAREN CICERO

When I picked up my 6-year-old daughter, Katie, from school a few months ago, I had a big surprise for her: We were going to meet up with her Aunt Pam and two cousins, Tori, 6, and Aly, 3, for a girls' weekend at the Great Wolf Lodge. The resort—part of a large chain of indoor water parks—in the Pocono Mountains is just a 45-minute drive from our home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. My sister-in-law and I had been eager to go on vacation together, and since the kids love splashing around in the pool, we figured this two-night excursion would be perfect.

Knowing that our girls would want to share a room, I was happy to find that the resort offers a variety of accommodations for larger families: Some have bunk beds and others have sleeper sofas, but we picked the two-story Loft

COURTESY OF GREAT WOLF LODGE

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Fireplace Suite. At 840 square feet, it would have plenty of space for everyone to sprawl out, and the three queen-size beds (two downstairs and one upstairs) meant we wouldn't be sleeping on top of one another. Even though it cost \$400 per night, it was cheaper than getting separate rooms. Plus, admission to the water park was included so we reasoned that we wouldn't be spending a lot of extra money on entertainment.

Are We There Yet?

When we arrived at the resort around 4 P.M., the lobby was packed with families, but it felt more energetic than chaotic. Each child got an activity book to keep her occupied in the check-in line, which moved quickly. The only unusual thing: All guests—even little kids—have to wear a wristband to show that they're staying at the hotel. The band is required to get into the water park and also doubles as your room key (you scan it at the door).

We went right to our suite. The girls loved it: They must have run up and down the stairs in the loft ten times before claiming one of the three TVs to watch cartoons. Although the room was clean and spacious, Pam and I were a bit disappointed by the tacky-looking linens and furniture.

On the other hand, we were impressed by the resort's buffet-style restaurant, The Loose Moose Cottage. Tori has severe nut allergies, and this restaurant was super accommodating. A chef actually came to our table to discuss the allergy and then made Tori exactly what she wanted to eat: french fries, spaghetti, and watermelon. Our food was very good too; the buffet had a large salad bar and a wide selection



It's a playground in a pool, with all sorts of water activities and adventures.

of fruit, plus several meat, pasta, and fish entrées. There was also a section with typical kiddie stuff, like nuggets, mac 'n' cheese, and mini hot dogs. The bill, with tax and tip, was about \$100 for the five of us—and totally worth it.

After dinner that night, we stumbled on to storytime by the fireplace in the lobby. The kids snuggled together on the comfy couches to listen to a staffer read to them. And it gave Pam and me a much-needed ten-minute breather.

Pool Party

The girls woke up early the next morning, eager to get to the park when it opened at 9 A.M. It's a massive water wonderland: Imagine pools nearly the size of two football fields and divided into sections with colorful slides that crisscross. At the entrance, there's a station to pick up towels and life jackets. But our eyes were immediately drawn to Fort Mackenzie, a four-story tree house with a 1,000-gallon water bucket on top that tips over every few minutes. As you climb up the stairs and

cross the suspension bridges, you encounter different water obstacles—it dumps on you, misters spray it out, and there are squirt guns galore.

The area that turned out to be our home away from home? Whooping Hollow, a two-foot-deep section for kids under 48 inches tall. The girls wanted to go down the four small and medium slides here, so we put down our bags at a nearby table and—get this—did not have to apply sunscreen to three wiggly, fair-skinned kids for a change. Since there was a lifeguard at the top of the slides (in fact, this was the best lifeguard coverage I've seen at any pool or water park), Pam and I waited at the bottom of the slides. The water was warm and looked very nice yet didn't feel overly chlorinated. We'd been a little worried about how clean a water park would be when we first booked the trip, but friends who'd been there assured us that it wasn't a problem. And they were right.

Next to the Hollow, our favorite spot was the wave pool, which starts at just a few inches deep and goes up to five feet. We stayed where the girls could and for a bit, then grabbed inner tubes for them to ride on. They squealed with delight as they floated over the waves.

A Magical Evening

Aly was ready for a nap by the middle of the afternoon, so we headed to the room to rest. When we were refreshed, we went to find out what the deal was

Water Park 411

For more info greatwolf.com Starting rate around \$230 for a family suite in the fall 11 other locations in Kansas City, Kansas; Concord, North Carolina; Niagara Falls, Canada; Grand Mound, Washington; Mason, Ohio; Sandusky, Ohio; Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin; Traverse City, Michigan; Williamsburg, Virginia; and Grapevine, Texas

with the magic wands. We kept seeing children running down the halls with them throughout the day. A friendly clerk at the gift shop told us it was MagiQuest, a game unique to the resort. You buy a wand for \$16 that gets programmed with different "quests" to solve, and you accumulate points as you progress (similar to a video game). And if you visit or stay here again, you can bring the wand with you and pick up where you left off.

We took the wands to the Cub Club, a supervised play area where for a few extra dollars they decorated them with ribbons, peel-off gems, and flowers. Then, we meandered around three floors, using them to light up gems, open treasure chests, and make paintings on the walls glow. About 90 minutes later, the girls solved the quest and ended up at a computer screen where they were declared "maidens."

That by itself would have been a great way to end the night. But instead,

we put the kids in jammies and took them downstairs to hear a story from a giant talking clock tower in the middle of the lobby. Pam and I used the time to grab a drink at the lobby Starbucks and hash out our plans for the next day.

The Last Hurrah

The game plan was to be out of the room by the 11 A.M. checkout time, but after spending the morning figuring out which coloring book, headband, and souvenir belonged to which kid, it was clear we weren't going to make it. Luckily, the front-desk clerk gave us an extra few hours without any hassle.

After leaving the room, Pam and her girls went back to the water park for an hour, while Katie wanted to try out the game room and do a little more MagiQuest. A big perk is that the resort allows you to stay at the water park until 9 P.M. on your last day (there are lockers in the large changing room where you can store dry clothes).

On the ride home, the kids talked about our next trip there. Would we make it a tradition? Maybe. But Pam and I agreed we'd do a few things differently: For starters, we'd get a cheaper suite because we really didn't spend much time in the room. We'd also check into the resort's special packages before booking. For example, the resort had a meal plan that would have saved us around \$100 on food. Finally, we'd wait until after Aly turned 5. While she definitely enjoyed herself, there would be a lot more for her to do in another year. In fact, I wouldn't recommend the resort to friends if their oldest is under 5. It's best to go when the kids are between 6 and 12—and can take advantage of everything the park has to offer. In the meantime, we'd drive up just for a day of MagiQuest. "I thought I'd like the slides the most," Katie told her dad at home. "But playing with the wand was my favorite part." Spoken like a true princess. ☐

Other Great Water Parks Looking for options? Check out three more resorts for kids.

• Kalahari Resorts

Sandusky, Ohio
(kalahariresorts.com)

Park Highlights The African-themed resort has something for every age, including a wave pool, lazy river, and slides. Older kids will dig the surfing simulators and the zip coaster, which blasts you over hills and into gushing geysers. Little ones will love Crocodile Cove, an activity pool and tot play area.

Dry-Land Fun The Safari Adventures program will definitely get your kids out of the pool. They can serve as Jr. Zoo Keepers, take camel rides, and feed the animals. Or check out the Kalahari's Kids Club for arts and crafts, games, contests, and other neat activities.

• Water Park of America

Bloomington, Minnesota
(waterparkofamerica.com)

Park Highlights The ten-story-tall water-slide complex will top your list. For something a little less thrilling, hop into the Lake Superior wave pool or splash around in the Fort Snelling play area, which features cool structures for climbing, sliding, and getting soaked.

Dry-Land Fun It's got a great location—right around the corner from the massive Mall of America. Take advantage of the resort's free shuttle to explore the must-see mall, home to the Nickelodeon Universe indoor theme park, Underwater Adventures Aquarium, Lego Imagination Center, and more attractions.

• Wilderness Resort

Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin
(wildernessresort.com)

Park Highlights If the resort's four separate indoor water-park buildings were combined, it would be the largest in the world. Along with the wave pool and lazy river, it has unique rides for families, including the Dueling Mammoth that lets you race each other to the bottom and a five-story rafting slide that fits up to five people at a time.

Dry-Land Fun There's just as much to do outside the pool, from "The Wild Abyss" mini golf (where you play by real aquariums and through 3-D, black-light-lit courses) to the WildKids' Club to the foam-ball-packed Timberland Play Park.