

Tourist Attractions & Parks

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by Frank Seninsky

Sahara Sam's Oasis Indoor Waterpark



Sahara Sam's Oasis is a \$23 million 58,000-square-foot indoor waterpark with 12 attractions located on 13 acres in West Berlin, N.J. Construction started on April 3, 2008, for what is being billed as "The Latest, Greatest, and Wettest Attraction on the East Coast!" The opening is scheduled for February 2009.

Amusement Entertainment Management's **Jerry Merola**, summed it up best: "Sahara Sam's is a landmark project for the Northeast quadrant of the country. Despite some incredible challenges in locating and acquiring an appropriate development site, coupled with the intense regulatory climate within New Jersey, I do not believe another complex of this type will be achievable in this marketplace. Thanks to the perseverance and resolve of the entire Girlya family, the New Jersey and Philadelphia regions will soon possess one of the leisure entertainment industry's finest jewels."

Ken Ellis, president of the Aquatic Development Group, Cohoes, N.Y. (ADG) added, "This stand-alone-indoor waterpark will be very successful. It is located in an ideal spot and we were able to incorporate a large number of water attractions that cover every age group into a very tight footprint. The challenge of the 'Flow Rider' will greatly help increase the repeat customer frequency of visitation." Aquatic Development Group was chosen after an intense bidding process. ADG's headquarters is located just three hours away and they had previously worked in New Jersey designing the Six Flags Hurricane Harbor Waterpark. AEM has previously worked with ADG on the Massanutten Resort Indoor Waterpark in Harrisonburg, Va., and the Kalahari Resort in Sandusky, Ohio.

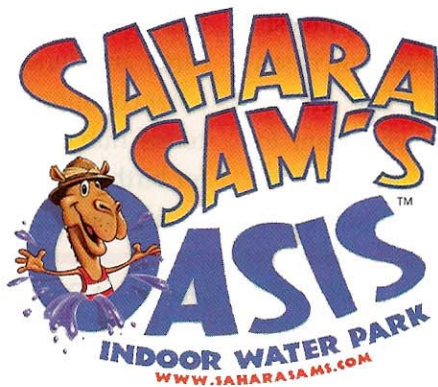
Sahara Sam's "Firsts"

H2O Entertainment Group Director of Operations **Ilya Girlya** is very proud that Sahara Sam's is not only first class in every way, but "first" in some other historic areas as well: "We are the first approved indoor waterpark in New Jersey, the first stand-alone indoor waterpark in the continental United States, we have the first 'Flow Rider' in the state of N.J., and the industry's first retractable roof with the thicker translucent panels."

After extensive research, AEM and Ilya decided that a translucent and not a transparent retractable roof was the best choice. A retractable roof allows for frequent air refreshing. Structures Unlimited, Inc. of Manchester, N.H., was chosen for the project. Their translucent roof retains more heat and blocks out the "bad" sunlight that stains the fiberglass structures and everything else inside but lets in the "good" sunlight. The 2-3/4 inch thick panels have more thermal properties than the traditional three quarter polycarbonate panels that are used in other indoor waterparks.

Going Green

Another first is that Sahara Sam's will produce a portion of its own electricity and save more than \$100,000 per year by "going green." Aegis Energy Service Company's, (Springfield, Mass.) "co-generation system" was chosen for this purpose. They have developed a combined heat and power system that produces electricity through gas fired engines. Natural gas spins the engine that produces the electricity and the excess burn-off (heat) is recycled—





The immediate Girlya Family, (left to right), son Yan and wife Debbie with Bianca, 1, daughter Gabriella, Sam and Betty, wife Tricia with Aiden, 1 1/2 and son Ilya.

like a heat exchanger - and used to heat the pools and the domestic hot water. Ilya reports that, "We will save 15 percent from the utility grid per kilowatt, that is 10 cents/ kw-hr x 15 percent."

Waterless urinals are another new technology that is being used. There is no flushing water. A special cartridge that handles 7,000 uses before needing to be replaced will save many thousands of gallons of water each year. Also note that Sahara Sam's will be using its own well water for all non-potable water and city water for potable water (drinking water).

They Said It Couldn't Be Done

Many industry critics said that this project could not be accomplished. "The demographics are very strong," Merola said. "There are more than 9,700 hotel rooms among the 80 hotels within the 15-mile target market that includes downtown Philadelphia." Ilya added, "The N.J.-Philadelphia market is four times the size of the typical Midwest market where most of the current indoor waterparks are operating and being planned. Most of our area's hotels are built on small landlocked sites that cannot add an indoor waterpark. We have already partnered with many of these hotels whose guests are looking for a one-day leisure activity. These 'partnered packages' are actually less expensive than staying at any other indoor waterpark hotel! Sahara Sam's will cater to the day-tripper consumer. Our tourism market is also very strong. There is a built-in excursion business that is made up of teens and pre-teens traveling sports teams- soccer and baseball and even regatta races that

come to our market looking for an entertainment experience. With all of these opportunities, Sahara Sam's has been designed for future expansion. In fact, an additional 40,000 square feet can easily be added to the building."

During the construction phase, the tag line "You're Not Wet Yet" is being successfully used to market online season passes (hundreds have already been sold in just a few weeks). This same tag line could also be used to describe the incredible challenges that Jerry referred to and Ilya lived since January 2005 when the loan process started. As the old saying goes, "You can lead a camel to water, but..."

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Contact Frank Seninsky or Jerry Merola at (732) 254-3773, e-mail us at
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The History of the Deal

In 2003 while surfing the Web, Ilya came across an article that AEM's Jerry Merola wrote about the success and potential of indoor waterparks. Ilya became intrigued and dialed the phone number of AEM, which he noted was located only one hour away. "I was impressed that I was able to speak to Jerry on that initial call and he provided me with a great background on the indoor waterpark business. Jerry suggested I go to Wisconsin Dells, the 'Indoor Waterpark Capital of the World' and thoroughly go through their 18 indoor waterparks (just as Frank had done). I just fell in love with the concept after seeing the Kalahari's second expansion."

Ilya continued, "I met with AEM (Jerry and Frank) and asked if we could do a free-standing model without a hotel to bring the cost of the project within a range that our family company, Sambe Construction, could afford to finance. [Sambe

Construction is a general contractor focused on the federal and state sector for public bid work, has over 100 union employees, and has been in business in New Jersey since 1983]. AEM was retained to do a feasibility study/business plan researching all of New Jersey for the best area to concentrate on. South Jersey, just outside of Philadelphia, turned out to be the best fit. David Sangree, HL Advisors, did the appraisal feasibility study after AEM did the original feasibility study. David agreed that this was a strong market. And so began the process to find and purchase the land with the best road networks and obtaining all state, county and local approvals. That step ended up taking 1.5 years!" During this time Ilya continued doing his homework and traveled to many indoor waterpark projects and attended every World Waterpark Association symposium. Ilya made it a point to state that, "I have been extremely happy working with AEM. They have been responsive to our every need. A tremendous amount of thought and logic

are included and all of their feasibility study figures are backed up, not fabricated. Jerry is always accessible, returns my e-mails immediately and is on top of things. Jerry and Frank make a great team."



Chairman Sam Girlya makes the opening remarks at the official groundbreaking ceremony on April 3, 2008. West Berlin Mayor Phyllis Magazzu (right) and Ilya Girlya, director of operations (left). Sam made it clear to the large audience that Sahara Sam's could not be possible without the assistance of Jerry Merola of Amusement Entertainment Management and of course his son Ilya's passion and persistence. Sam then also smiled proudly as he looked at his other son Yon, saying, "Yon is now in charge of building Sahara Sam's so all the pressure is now on him to complete it on schedule."

After spending several months seeking approval with a nearby township, the council finally voted "no" to the project. They said they were concerned about noise, traffic and pollution. It was disheartening when 400 senior citizens showed up for the public hearing, many arriving by local community



The Sambe construction crew devised their own "tipping bucket" and pool for the groundbreaking ceremony where each of the Girlya family members and West Berlin city officials got to pull their individual rope to the bucket as the band played and the crowd cheered.

buses to state their objections, including “Disney would be coming into our backyards.” Ilya said, “It was an election year and the council members didn’t want to rock the boat.”

“The experience with West Berlin was completely different,” said Ilya. “The approval process at the West Berlin public hearing took only 20 minutes. West Berlin is the best town to work with in the entire state. Mayor Phyllis Magazzu embraced the project, quickly recognizing that Sahara Sam’s is a family entertainment center with an indoor waterpark. The planning and zoning process and obtaining the site plan permits took several months. The toughest parts were getting the county and state approvals, which took another year.

Pricing

Ilya believes strongly in annual membership passes for this local day-tripper market, and \$596 covers a typical family of four (two adults/two children). Ilya pointed out that this is about the same amount that this same family would spend to go to a traditional hotel / indoor waterpark for just one night! Sahara Sam’s is also primed for birthday parties and group events. Birthday party discounts are another membership benefit. Other added incentives and benefits include two free tickets to the Camden Riversharks. You can bet that Ilya will find more “perceived value” items to include in the Sahara Sam’s packages. He never stops learning and thinking.

Convergence.net of Aliso Viejo, Calif., (David Matty, president), is handling the online ticketing platform. They have a very impressive system and hundreds of membership passes have already been sold in less than two weeks almost 10 months before the scheduled opening.

Ilya wanted to especially thank his family, ADG’s Ken Ellis and Jim Dunn, ProSlide’s Phil Hayles, SCS Interactive’s Doug Pagel, the AEM



Mascot Sahara Sam receives a kiss from a real camel that attended the official groundbreaking ceremony.

Team, and the West Berlin Township for all of their help and support to make Sahara Sam’s Oasis a reality. The entire indoor waterpark industry is watching from the sidelines. When you combine thirsty camels, the dessert, water, and technology, great things can be accomplished. Sahara Sam’s could turn out to be a new model for indoor waterparks. To me it is like building a 9,700-room hotel and managing it for zero dollars and having the opportunity of having a percentage of the guests visit Sahara Sam’s at least once during their multiple night stay and perhaps even come back again. Ilya and the Girlya family, we thank you for your perseverance and commitment to the industry.

For more information go to www.sahasasams.com and view the video walk through or contact Ilya directly at ilya@sahasasams.com. Sahara Sam’s is located at 535 N. Route 73 in West Berlin, N.J. ☞



Sahara Sam's Oasis Attractions

Rip Curl Flow Rider: Surf or boogie-board and test your skills against the simulated ocean waves. The first of its kind in New Jersey.

Mt. Kilimanjaro: This family raft ride starts off 45 feet above the ground and takes you 390 feet through the adventure river's white water rapids (with geysers along the way) to the open sea. The family rafts have a closed bottom so the younger children will also enjoy the experience.

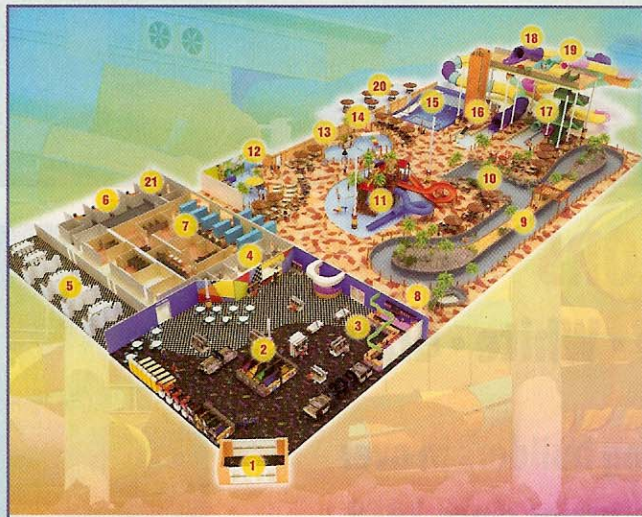
Snake Eyes: Also known as "Double Trouble" these two enclosed 8 feet in diameter slide barrels make several turns as you pick up speed and head downhill. A great competitive racing attraction.

Crocodile Flats: Hang onto the overhead rope system as you skillfully and carefully navigate across the Lagoon. Watch out for the crocs and don't fall in!

Congo Bongo Adventure River: This is not your typical "lazy river." This river rafting adventure has water geysers, swirling vortexes to get caught in and water cannons where your friends and foes and random pranksters have the opportunity to score a direct water hit.

Lizard Lagoon: Just for the little guys, a zero-depth pool entry, mini tube slides, mini water geysers (well almost mini), and a baby bungee swing for toddlers.

Tim Buk Tu Tree Fort: This giant tree house has more water cannons, sprays from all directions, and a 1,000-gallon tipping bucket. (SCS Interactive Model 550).



Twelve attractions have been tightly but efficiently packed into Sahara Sam's, enough to cater to the entire family.

Sam's Slam Dunker Activity Pool: Water basketball in the middle where it should be!

Gold Rush Arcade: The 3,000-square-foot game zone is designed for all the top redemption, novelty, and video simulator machines with top quality prizes at the redemption prize center.

Sam Dunes Café: Don't miss out on tasting the "Sahamarita" and Sam's other non-alcoholic drinks along with pizza, sandwiches and snacks.

Warming Tub: Every camel worth its salt needs a warming tub.

Sahara Sam's Patio: Relax adjacent to the indoor waterpark with full food and beverage service available.

(Frank Seninsky is president of the Alpha-Omega Group of companies, which includes a consulting agency, Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC (AEM), a nationwide revenue sharing equipment provider, Alpha-Omega Amusements, Inc., Alpha-BET Entertainment, and Alpha-Omega Sales, a game and related equipment distributor. All are headquartered in East Brunswick, N.J. During his 38 years in the leisure entertainment industry, Seninsky has presented nearly 300 seminars and penned more than 1,200 articles. He served as president of the Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) from 1990-2000 and as the President of the International Association for the Leisure & Entertainment Industry (IALEI) from 2005-2006. Seninsky currently serves on the IALEI Board of Directors and Executive Committee as a Past President. Contact information: Phone (732) 254-3773, Fax (732) 254-6223, e-mail: fseninsky@aol.com Website: www.AEMLLC.com. For more information, circle RSN 276 on card.)



Frank Seninsky.