

A howlin' good time

Great Wolf Lodge a splash-happy family getaway not far from home

Tired of the long, cold winter? Beat those post-holiday blahs and dig your bathing suit out of the attic. It's time for some wet and wild water rides, two days chock full of them. Never fear, this oasis of fun is only an hour away at Great Wolf Lodge in Williamsburg, right off Interstate 64.

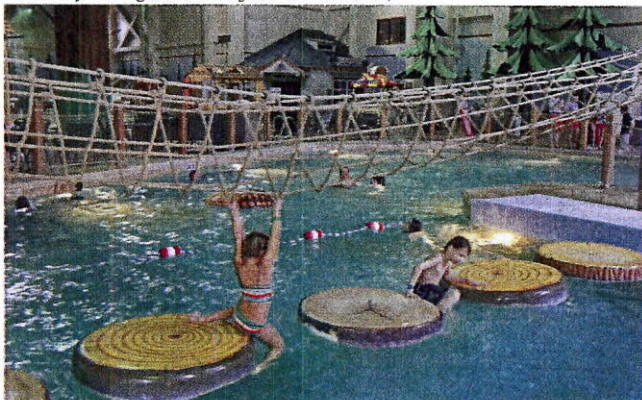
The lodge's elaborate indoor water park is quite an incredible sight with its gigantic water fort, eight slides, five pools (with a wave pool), and a lazy river. The temperature is kept at a comfortable 84 degrees, so there's neither shivering nor overpowering heat. (By the way, there's not a speck of dirt to be found either.) For rumbling tummies, Spirit Island Snack Shop is handily located right in the park. On arrival you can access the park beginning at 1 p.m. until closing at 9 p.m. In addition, you are free to use the park the entire next day after checking out. Now that's one convenient break from reality.

Believe it or not, there are lots of other fun activities to make your "pack" forget about the water for a while. First off, there is the happening Northern Lights Arcade with 7,000 square feet of more than 100 video games (picture Chuck E. Cheese's on steroids) that will have them ping-pong. A second option is the brand-new Race Zone, a fantastic option for young NASCAR fans. Kids assemble their own remote-controlled cars with the "pit crew" and race them on the "speedway" for 20 minutes. And the best part is they bring their creations home. (Speedway for home not included.) Weather permitting, there is also an outdoor mini-golf course.

Our hands-down favorite activity was the highly interactive Magi-Quest, well worth the trip for that alone. It truly lives up to its name - it is downright magical. First, your wizard-in-training selects a wand (that you gallantly purchase) and has it activated (another gallant purchase.) Now the Force is with you. (Sorry, wrong movie.) A quick



Great Wolf Lodge in Williamsburg is an expansive indoor water park packed with activities for all ages. (Photos by Loretta Sherwood)



swish and a flick of the wand now make things move, light up, and/or speak.

With specific video instructions from Dumbledore, you're off on a series of crazy Harry Potter-esque adventures, battling dragons, defeating a goblin king, and accumulating gold coins. Note: it is well worth the dollar to buy the field guide. In fact, it's imperative. Plus you may use it again. Young wizards can re-activate their wands on future visits, which do not require an overnight stay.

For those "cubs" age 10 and up,

they will be howlin' with delight upon discovering "gr8_space Tech Center." Younger pups are also welcome with a parent in tow. This funky hangout has it all - Wii, Xbox, TVs, movies, and computers with inappropriate sites blocked. When the water park closes, the cool kids head there in droves for some Guitar Hero, karaoke, snacks and dancing. Your tween won't want to leave, and you may need that break.

Another bonus is the Cub Club, offering "cub sitting" and a convenient location right by Elements Spa

and not too far from the large Buckhorn Exchange for a quick shopping fix.

There are a couple of restaurant/bar options downstairs, both offering a "Cub's Menu" for \$7.99 with souvenir wolf ears, as well as a small Pizza Hut. The Bear Paw Sweets & Eats down on the first floor offers much more than you would think. The pastries and fudge are made in house by the pastry chef. They also have full Starbucks coffee options, fruit and granola, delicious microwaveable breakfast sandwiches, Krispy Kreme donuts, and an entire wall of candy. Oh, did I fail to mention ice cream?

If you want to leave the hotel but don't want to get back in the car, Jungle Jim's lies literally across the parking lot. This place is a real gem with "safari" kids' meals and keep-the-mask menus. Better yet, it opens at 8 a.m. with a bargain breakfast for \$4.99. They will also deliver take-out right to your door. Now that's service! Not just a kid joint, this hip place is quite a watering hole as well, boasting a full bar with frozen drinks galore - and no drive home.

Just a couple of miles down Rochambeau Road is legendary Pierce's Bar-B-Que. This beloved Virginia establishment is well worth the effort of tracking down your car keys. Their barbecue - as well as everything else on the menu - is cooked from scratch and sublime. The kids' chicken strips are humongous pieces of white meat, arriving with a drink, fries and a cookie. They will prepare take-out but don't deliver.

And one last tip! Before booking your room, be sure to run a quick Internet search for coupons and/or discounts because there are often promotions out there. And have yourself a great wolf time at Great Wolf Lodge! **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a local freelance writer and mother, already has her bathing suit and wand packed for her next trip to Great Wolf Lodge. See you there!