

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPALS

ST. LOUIS ARCHITECTS FIGURE OUT HOW
TO SEDUCE JADED TRAVELERS INTO JOY,
EVERYWHERE FROM SIX FLAGS TO THE
GRAND CANYON TO THE PYRAMIDS AT

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN

stlouis
MAGAZINE
August 2007

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"LEISURE IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS."

Travelers don't seek their pleasure as spontaneously as they used to. Time-stressed and overwhelmed by choices, they're not about to gather up brochures, fly to a big city and take their chances. Nor do they want to lie for days in an umbrella-drink stupor while their skin crisps. They want to *experience* something. Those with families want a destination packed with so much to see and do that there's no chance they'll go home fuming that they wasted their money. Those without families want what wealthy Americans used to find in Europe: a chance to indulge and reward themselves, escape their cares, brag about their worldliness and have just enough adventure to change their lives.

Just enough, no more.

There's an art to designing places that can meet all those demands, and PGAV Destination Consulting has refined that art into a science it calls "destinology." Principals Jim Moorkamp and Mike Konzen, vice presidents of St. Louis-based PGAV, lead the division. They think about things like how to shoot concrete through a hose, sculpt it into a rock wall and then rub it soft enough that it won't chafe a beluga whale's bulging forehead. They puzzle over why somebody built a visitor facility that covered the Union line at the Gettysburg Battlefield. They ponder what tickles travelers and what makes them cranky.

"Today's consumer wants to be in control," Konzen says. "People don't want to feel like

they are being processed in any way, shape or form. They like options and information, and they want the sense that they are in charge of creating their own adventure." By the same token, they want those options perfectly planned and available on demand. "People are so starved for leisure time, it's become so important to them, that the worst thing that can happen is that they feel their time is wasted," he says.

Started in 1965 as a small, conventional architectural firm with offices over a grocery store in the Central West End, PGAV began doing destination consulting four years later, when one of its clients, Anheuser-Busch, got into the theme-park business. Suddenly PGAV architects found themselves in Williamsburg, Va., designing the lush Kingsmill Resort & Spa and its adjacent Busch Gardens. The experts in the National Amusement Park Historical Association voted Busch Gardens the world's most beautiful theme park every year for the next 17 years.

PGAV had hit upon the perfect combination of authenticity, adventure, sensory delight and choreographed escape. Now, how to repeat the triumph at other sites?

One of the firm's architects dug out college notes on the hierarchy of human needs. Using Abraham Maslow's famous pyramid diagram, he and his colleagues overlaid it with what they'd learned about the ideal vacation over time.

First, and most broadly, they had to make each destination safe, welcoming, comfortable and easy to understand. People didn't want to worry or feel disoriented, and they didn't want to spend precious minutes trying to decipher how to navigate their fun.

It wasn't enough to create an escape from routine and responsibility; they had to make it entertaining. And it wasn't enough to make it entertaining; they had to do so in a way that educated, so people left feeling somehow improved or enriched.

Travelers want to go on a quest, and they want to come back with lifelong memories. They want adventures they can brag about—but controlled adventures, in which nobody gets lost or hurt or has to learn about snake venom or get certified in spelunking or even open a map.

Destinations should be engaging enough to deepen the travelers' relationships with each other—save a marriage, perhaps, or quell a teenage rebellion. A vacation should be a form of self-expression, encourage self-discovery, maybe even change somebody's life.

Ultimately, travelers crave peak experiences, moments of transcendence so powerful they break the mind free from the chafing constraints of time and space. Such experiences can take many forms: an endorphin high or an adrenaline rush; a step backward in time or across the species



The Georgia Aquarium is a sea of superlatives: largest whale shark tank, largest live coral reef tank ...

barrier; a glimpse of grandeur, a silent awe or a flash of insight.

Just when destinology was starting to sound like a new religion, the architects remembered to factor in “the new luxury,” a set of temptations and a sense of entitlement that was prompting spending splurges even in the once Calvinist middle and working classes. However these travelers reached transcendence, they wanted to indulge themselves along the way. Reward themselves. Take care of themselves. Show off—as nonchalantly as possible—their taste and their success.

So the PGAV architects built their pyramid—and today they’re using it at the Great Pyramid of Giza, where they are designing a large-format theater for the Grand Egyptian Museum. They’re also reinventing a theme park near Barcelona and designing a new aquarium so spectacular, it will allow Hong Kong’s government-owned Ocean Park to compete with the newly arrived Disneyland. After all, PGAV designed the largest aquarium in the world, the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta.

The firm has projects at the Biltmore Estate—the largest private residence in the country, with the most visited winery—and the Hearst Castle, Hoover Dam and the Grand Canyon, Gettysburg National Military Park and Niagara Falls, and one of the wonders of the modern retail world, the Bass Pro flagship in Springfield, Mo.

Here in St. Louis, PGAV has designed spaces underneath the Gateway Arch and at the Saint Louis Science Center. It also helped transform the Saint Louis Zoo, giving the big cats a natural habitat instead of a cage and bringing the penguins out from behind glass.

Sometimes a destination’s requirements are practical or scientific (is a 6-million-gallon tank big enough to house the only whale sharks in captivity in the western hemisphere?). At other times, the challenges are almost purely psychological: What is fun, anyway?—and for whom, and how do you change its tone?

Moorkamp thinks a lot about fun these days: PGAV’s been charged with reinventing two of the Six Flags theme parks, Discovery Kingdom near San Francisco and Great Adventure in Jackson, N.J. “They’d lost the nostalgia of what it’s like to be a kid,” he explains. “Their new chairman wants to get away from the teenage tattoos and back to the families with strollers.”

PGAV’s slick marketing newsletter doesn’t dwell on sentiment or use phrases like “making dreams come true.” Still, Konzen says, “A lot of the things we do make aspirational ideas, like hiking down into the Grand Canyon, available to the general public. Most people just pull their car up to the edge. Through our three-dimensional theater, you get people down into the canyon.”

At least, you get their imaginations down there. That’s the paradox: PGAV’s architects, planners and exhibit designers strive for authenticity, because they know that’s what gives an experience its power—yet they often find themselves using media to make things real.

The key, they say, is to focus people’s attention instead of scattering it and to simplify the experience but not the content. We’re sick of choices, and we’re sick of virtual reality. Give us something real—whether it’s a polar bear ambling past or a peek at General Patton’s love letters—and you’ll knock our socks off. But don’t expect us to absorb it unprepared.

“The time-stressed family isn’t going to walk out on the Gettysburg battlefield and imagine what it might have been like,” Moorkamp remarks. “You have to help them understand what they’re looking at. How do you interpret that for a kid who grew up playing Nintendo?”

The answer isn’t always electronic—often PGAV would rather have a human being making the connection, interpreting the site. But either way, the firm’s designers have learned to avoid the media barrage of everyday life by slowing the pace and letting people direct their own experience. At the Georgia Aquarium, for example, you walk into a grand hall and can choose to enter any of the environments encircling it. “The confidence that comes



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with people being able to choose their own path is what enables them to slow down,” Konzen explains.

“We consciously avoided overload,” Moorkamp adds. “You can see only one major element at a time.”

To research that project, they visited 55 aquariums in 13 countries over three months. That’s how they avoid Disneyfication and kitsch, Moorkamp says: by basing what they do in scientific and historical accuracy, authenticity and artistry. “We try to never do something that is a cartoon. We are condensing, bringing things closer together so people can experience them. We do try to amplify the experience—but we don’t ever want to reduce it.”

Media might do the organizing and explaining, but those coveted moments of

transcendence come from nature, beauty, powerful truths and spontaneous (but carefully planned) interactions.

“I took my family to swim with dolphins just after we opened Discovery Cove in Orlando,” Moorkamp says. “We have in our living room a picture of my daughter kissing a dolphin. It’s the trophy you take home. When you’re with the dolphin, you are almost in a bubble. You don’t see anybody around you. You are totally in the moment.”

Konzen nods. “We are doing several projects on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. I took my family up last October, so we could share one of the world’s great wonders. I’d probably seen it 30 times, but that time, I got to see it through my kids’ eyes. My son’s 8—he said, ‘Wow, that’s like a million bathtubs.’ And my daughter said,

‘It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.’ “So much of travel,” he adds, “is about who you’re with and how you share the experience.”

Thus far, PGAV has been able to count on a willing suspension of disbelief, a hunger for novelty and delight. Now, however, the architects have a new generation to analyze. “Gen X ... we haven’t quite got our minds around Gen X yet,” Moorkamp admits. “They approach vacations differently. Leisure time is more important to them. They’re skeptical about conventional marketing. And they’re cynical about a packaged experience.”

The secret of pleasure changes for every generation.

The trick is breaking the code. ●

PGAV Destination Consulting develops and revitalizes destinations visited by over 75 million people every year. The firm is currently engaged with the world’s most important cultural, historic and natural landmarks on four continents. Providing strategic and innovative solutions to achieve economic sustainability, the firm is dedicated to life’s greatest adventures. With offices in St. Louis and Kansas City, PGAV Destination Consulting has 120 employees representing expertise in planning, architecture, business strategy, art, sculpture, exhibit design, interior design, graphics, theater production and landscape architecture. www.pgav.com

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