

Morgan's Wonderland Camp caters to visitors of all abilities, needs

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SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Quite often, the amusement industry can blur into a cohesive mold of ride hardware and funnel cakes. Every now and then, something tugs at heartstrings to remind people of this special business and the memories it creates.

Morgan's Wonderland opened in 2010 as a nonprofit and gained national attention by creating a park for children and families of all abilities. Its biggest challenge was educating people that it *wasn't* just an amusement park for those with special needs but a place of inclusion that was created for all people to play and interact together.

The nonprofit park was such a success that Morgan's Inspiration Island was created next door in 2017. Combating the Texas heat, the water park is tailored to all families, even those with members in wheelchairs.

With the Morgan's Wonderland Inclusion Foundation established in 2020, the mission has com-



The elevated challenge course is made for fully abled and physically challenged participants to interact side by side. AT/TIM BALDWIN; COURTESY MORGAN'S WONDERLAND

pleted its newest chapter in inclusion. Located about 20 miles north of Morgan's Wonderland, a new destination called Morgan's Wonderland Camp throws the idea of summer camp — although open year round — a new twist. Everybody can come.

"We believe Morgan's

Wonderland Camp constitutes another of the world's greatest places for inclusive, barrier-free recreation," founder Gordon Hartman said. "It features more than 20 major elements including ziplines and a challenge course like none other. Special adaptations enable those with special needs to enjoy these thrilling attractions just like everyone else. All in all, we're proud to offer our guests an array of activities and facilities in a positive, uplifting environment."

The \$34 million endeavor (\$15 million of which was pledged by partner Valero Energy) resides on 102 acres in a wooded area north of San Antonio. While the area is being developed around the property, the unspoiled rugged terrain offers the feeling of a true camp, but with modern amenities and a vast offering of activities.

Among them are an assortment of bikes for all abilities; an arts and crafts area, which

includes a digital photography room and library; an amphitheater suitable for singalongs and storytelling; an aquatic facility featuring a heated pool, splash pad and relaxing river; an indoor, temperature-controlled basketball and volleyball court; a ranch offering horseback rides; target sports and archery; a nature center where campers interact with animals of all kinds and learn educational facts; and two ziplines.

The shorter zipline is 450 feet long; the longer one is 700 feet. Both rise 11 stories. For it to be inclusive, special harnesses are designed for individuals without upper body strength, and spaces for oxygen tanks and medical devices were built in allowing those devices to be taken aboard.

"When I went down for the open house, I was listening to people in wheelchairs talk about how special it was that a company built a zipline that they could ride," said Logan Checketts, president, Altitude

Rides and Attractions. "Not knowing that I happened to own that company, hearing that just made me feel incredible."

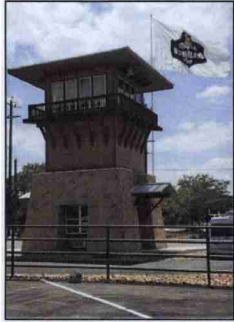
Checketts was surprised how the project opened the door. A second installation catering to such individuals was placed in Camp Courageous in Monticello, Iowa, shortly thereafter. The company, formerly known as Soaring Eagle, continues to market the zipline under the Soaring Eagle name, although the company offers multiple attractions in its portfolio.

"I have to give a shout out to the vision of the Morgan's team for initiating the changes needed to make an inclusive product," said Checketts. "They envisioned what they needed, and we were delighted to partner with them."

The speed can be adjusted to be more suitable for those who prefer a slower ride or still fly full throttle.

Main buildings in the complex are the dining hall that can seat 630 people at 63 tables, a camp store and a medical center. The medical center is an original house that stood on the property.

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Morgan's Wonderland Camp is part of a nonprofit organization. A Soaring Eagle zipline (above right) was tweaked to accommodate all riders.

AT/TIM BALDWIN; COURTESY MORGAN'S WONDERLAND





Regardless of physical ability, the system on the rock wall allows everyone to try (above left). All water activities offer zero entry (above right). A climate controlled pool adds to the accessibility. AT/TIM BALDWIN; COURTESY MORGAN'S WONDERLAND

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"Mr. Hartman owned the majority of the land, but there was a chunk of it that he needed to make the camp what he envisioned," said Leslie Mouton, director of marketing. "It was owned by a family. A woman's husband had passed away, but the house was special to her. Gordon started talking with her. She said, 'I don't know why, but I had this tug that I am supposed to do this.' She was recognized on our VIP night, and she was blown away. She then knew why she was compelled to do it."

Other buildings on the complex were designed to match the original house for a cohesive feel.

If this all-inclusive facility wasn't inspirational enough, the dedication to the community makes it even more so. Three partners enjoy a unique relationship with Morgan's Wonderland Camp.

The San Antonio Food Bank, which serves food-insecurity families in northern San Antonio, needed a branch in that part of town. With a facility built directly into the dining hall, the Food Bank serves meals for the campers while having a place to operate. For legal reasons, the Food Bank pays one dollar a year for the space. Likewise, the Bexar County Sheriff's Office has a substation located on the campground to shorten response times when area citizens call for assistance. The Edwards Aquifer Authority has created a 9,000-square foot EAA Education Outreach Center to broaden understanding of how the aquifer functions and the critical necessity to safeguard San Antonio's drinking water. This is part of the educational offerings while staying at the camp.

"We're really big about community-based instruction," said Mouton. "Eventually that will grow, and we can have groups from



Lower bunks have been designed to allow easy transfer of wheelchairs. AT/TIM BALDWIN

schools and civic groups. It will be hands-on education."

Ten smaller cabins sleeping 16 in eight bunkbeds include a private room that sleeps three additional campers. Three shower stalls, three toilets and one bathtub are in the restroom facilities. A washer and dryer, along with a refrigerator are in place as well. Ten larger cabins sport two sides of 16 beds, along with two bathrooms. A total of 32 campers can bunk in the larger cabins. All cabins are climate controlled.

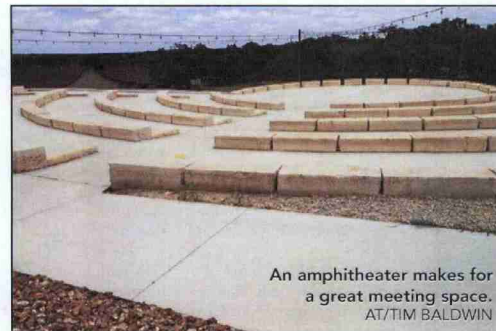
"When we decided on a camp, that brings some new challenges," said Mouton. "Horseback riding always had different ways to accommodate different people of all needs, but not on a rock wall, a challenge course or a zipline. The bunk beds were designed to be lower to be able to transfer easily from a wheelchair, plus the headroom allows them to sit up. The walking/biking trails

are wide enough so that if you are in a wheelchair, you don't have to go one in front of the other, you can be side by side and talk and communicate."

The rock wall and challenge course can accommodate those in wheelchairs via a specially designed pulley system and specific challenge course.

For the summer, Morgan's Wonderland Camp has welcomed camping partners, but the campground is making preparations to welcome the public starting in November for family weekends and outings. Like its sister parks, visitors with physical and cognitive challenges are admitted free.

"Like Morgan's Wonderland, the entire thought process when Gordon creates all these places is let's not imagine if there can be places where people can do these things side by side, let's make it happen," said Mouton. "We're a journey of inclusion."



An amphitheater makes for a great meeting space. AT/TIM BALDWIN