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VENDOR TALK – JANUARY 2025

MAKING WAVES: SURF PARKS TAKE CENTRE STAGE IN THE MENA ATTRACTIONS INDUSTRY

An article by: **thinking.**
adrenaline

Exploring the Rising Popularity of Surf Parks: Benefits, Opportunities, and Key Considerations for Developers

Introduction

There's a lot of talk these days about surf parks. Surfing, something said to have existed since ancient times in Peru and with a rich tradition in Polynesia where the activity held significant cultural importance, has now spread across the world to people of all nationalities, wherever a wave can break. Across the planet, you'll find surfers braving conditions ranging from freezing cold to tropical heat, riding waves from knee-high ripples to absolute monsters threatening their very being. Surfing attracts people from all walks of life, no matter where they come from or what they do for a living. That is surfing—it is a sport, pastime, hobby, passion, and for some, even a religion. Once it takes hold, it's very hard to let go.



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One Beginner's Journey

We watch in awe when we see videos of professionals riding massive overhead barrels with ease. It's truly aspirational. But once we try it ourselves, we quickly realise there is a lot more to it than what those talented individuals make it look like. For most people, it isn't just the thought of learning to surf that makes it a little daunting. Concerns about water safety, ocean currents, sharks, stingers, and even other surfers can dissuade people from trying something they'd love to do but see as just out of reach.

Let's face it, I'm biased. I learned to surf when I was young but had to do it the hard way. Growing up without daily access to a beach, I tagged along with my father each week to where he worked near the coast. After saving money from many weekly allowances, I finally bought my first surfboard. It was second-hand, dented all over, but it made me feel like I belonged among the surfers I saw out there. Surely it couldn't be too hard?



Well, yes, it could. I won't embarrass myself by revealing how many attempts it took before I stood up on a board for the first time! I never realised how perfectly everything had to align to catch a wave. Paddling out, getting into the right position, understanding where the wave breaks, knowing when to paddle, spotting a wave, building the right momentum—and after all that effort, someone else might be in the perfect position and take the wave from me! After much tenacity and failed attempts, I finally improved, but



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the journey took years. Catching my first wave hooked me on surfing, and I finally understood why so many love this pastime. Over my time as a surfer, I've had incredible experiences—trips to exotic places, quality time with friends, and special moments with my own children as they've learned to surf.



Enter Surf Parks

My ability to surf as frequently as I used to, however, has fluctuated over the years with changes in work, family, and other commitments. Because I've had less time to surf, this is perhaps where surf parks fit into the mix! Surf parks make surfing accessible to those with no access to the ocean, those aspiring to learn surfing independent of skill levels, and those with time constraints and recently have gained popularity across the world including the MENA region.

My First Surf Park Experience

Speaking of surf parks, my first experience was in 2016 at Wadi Adventure in Al Ain. It was one of the earliest surfing lagoons, among only a few in an industry that had historically been driven by water parks. At the time, most guest experiences involved wave pools as an add-on to a water park. Soon after, Kelly Slater put man-made surfing waves on the global map with The Ranch. Around the same time, Waco and Snowdonia were pioneering the early days of the surf park industry. Keep in mind, this was only in the past 10 years!

The Wave in Bristol, England, and Urbnsurf in Melbourne, Australia, using Wavegarden technology, are considered the first truly successful commercial models of surf parks. They cater to surfers and non-surfers alike, regardless of skill level. And now, in the MENA region, we have seen Surf Abu Dhabi open and a lot of discussion about potential surf park projects, with both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia planned to open in the next two years.



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The New Era of Surfing

We are now entering a new era where surfing is more accessible than ever. The creation of standing waves and dynamic waves in controlled environments has been enabled by rapidly developing technology. This, combined with an increasingly popular pastime, has kick-started a new type of surfer. These surfers can trade the many hours spent at the beach overcoming challenges just to stand up on their boards for a learning experience that takes only a few hours in a wave pool. Having seen it myself, new customers are absolutely standing up in their first session in a pool.



Urbnsurf, Sydney, Australia

Add to that the fact that experienced surfers can swap hours in the ocean for a dozen perfect waves in an hour—with no competition from other surfers and none of the hazards that can exist in the ocean. The level of skill development I've seen in this environment is remarkable. Many new learners had only been surfing for a few months, yet their skill levels in the surf park environment are phenomenal.

At this point I want to make it clear that surf parks will never replace the ocean!. However, surf parks are driving accessibility and creating more surf breaks for people to enjoy—especially those who might not normally have the chance.



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In summary, surf parks bring an awesome experience that various people love and make it possible for so many others that may have seen it as beyond their aspirational grasp. Technology has enabled this, and it is wonderful to see a new genre of healthy, activity-related experiences come to the fore like never before. But let's talk about other benefits we have seen due to this new sector opening up.

Just a Few of the Benefits

Blue Health: The benefits of surfing include mental health improvements, support for disadvantaged demographics, and programmes for people with determination. Surf parks have actively contributed to these groups, offering alternative support and experiences with great success.

Participation from All Segments: Building a surf park drives the community experience, creating a vibrant, inclusive welcome-all successful business sustained by its diverse patrons..



Community and Members: A core element of a surf park's success is the community it fosters. The ultimate goal is to create loyalty and commitment to have customers drive the culture in the park. Surfing, at its core, is something that can create intense passion with people and this combined with a sense of achievement can create a lifelong

commitment. By creating multi-week development programmes for beginners combined with accessible surfing environments and technology, surf parks can bring together cohorts of people embarking on the same journey, thereby creating micro-communities. These communities can then flourish through member gatherings, friendly competitions, and AI-driven video reviews of their surfing sessions. After a session, it is common to see groups of friends who had just surfed together cheer (and jeer!) each other while relaxing in the café, watching their session on the big screen. Without this sense of community, a surf park becomes just another transactional experience—which misses the essence of surfing.



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Health and Fitness: In a world increasingly driven by technology, encouraging active lifestyles is a growing challenge. Surf parks combine aspirational experiences with physical activity, providing a perfect solution. They offer a unique opportunity to inspire healthy habits while delivering the health benefits of an active lifestyle.

Commercial Outcomes: The combination of the above elements leads to successful commercial outcomes, enabling further growth and development of the surfing experience. By demonstrating sustainable business models and ensuring solid returns for investors, surf parks become highly attractive ventures. Additionally, integrating surf parks into multi-use developments—such as residential areas, sports facilities, and community hubs—creates synergies that drive both economic and community benefits. These factors not only promote the initial success of surf parks but also lay the groundwork for continued expansion and innovation in the industry.

Creating a Surf Park? Key Factors to Consider

The community and commercial outcomes for the industry are looking very positive with some amazing projects coming to the market across the world.



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Here are some key factors to consider when starting out:

Investment: Developing a surf park requires significant capital, often exceeding \$50 million. Projects are increasingly integrated into multi-use developments, including real estate, sports facilities, and community parks. Structuring the project in phases is crucial for success, just as with any new business.

Land & Regulatory Approvals: Obtaining development and operational approvals requires educating stakeholders and considering the availability and suitability of land. These projects aren't yet mainstream, so it's essential to address risks, mitigation strategies, and the overall story to help authorities understand the value of surf parks. Identifying the right location is critical, as factors such as accessibility, environmental conditions, and integration into local communities greatly impact the project's feasibility and success.



Technology: The advancements in surf park technology have been pivotal in driving the industry forward. Providers such as Wavegarden, Endless Surf, Kelly Slater Wave Co, American Wave Machines, Surf Lakes and more have or are developing cutting-edge systems that cater to surfers of all skill levels. The growth in the number of technology providers is a positive sign for the industry, fostering competition, innovation, and greater accessibility for surf parks worldwide.

Public Acceptance: Gaining community support is critical. Addressing environmental concerns, such as water usage and ecological impact, through transparency and sustainable practices helps build trust. Engaging local communities ensures developments align with public interests.

Sustainability: Sustainability must be a core focus, encompassing renewable energy, water usage, material selection, and treatment methods. As the industry grows, improving sustainability practices will be vital to long-term success.



The Wave, Bristol, UK



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New Concept: To succeed, developers need to present a thoroughly compelling story that resonates with potential investors. Collaborating closely with the community, demonstrating clear market demand, and forming partnerships with the surf industry and other stakeholders are vital steps in helping investors understand the transformative value and potential of a surf park.

New Development and Operations: My experience as the CEO of a surf park company was like navigating two poles—north and south! Running an operation in a new industry while simultaneously developing new projects is a challenge, as both areas demand careful attention. From a development and construction perspective, surf parks are still relatively new, meaning there is no simple turnkey solution. Each location is unique and requires meticulous consideration of environmental conditions, site location, ground conditions, and constructability. On the operational side, it's important to understand that this isn't just a pool; it's a dynamic environment involving waves, moving water, people and surfboards—all of which are complex to manage. Both these workstreams share the overarching requirement of carefully managed investment, financial planning, and customer satisfaction to ensure success.

Is It Worth It?



Having built and launched two surf parks, I can honestly say: yes, it is worth it! The intense experience of developing a surf park pales in comparison to the incredible rewards of creating communities and providing access to surfing for people who may never have imagined it possible. Watching lives change, seeing people fall in love with the sport, and witnessing the camaraderie that surf parks foster is truly inspiring. Approaching this journey with open eyes, resilience, agility, and the right

support is essential. It's a challenging path, but one that holds immense fulfillment. For me and others in this budding industry, the satisfaction of driving growth and innovation far outweighs the challenges. To those embarking on this journey, know that the effort will be worth it—you have the power to make an impact and build something transformative.



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Author:



Damon Tudor

Director, Thinking Adrenaline

Damon was the CEO of URBNSURF in Australia and holds the unique accolade of leading the only company in the world that has developed, built and operated two surf parks. An avid surfer, he has returned to the UAE (where he resided for 10 years previously) and spends his (free?) time chasing his kids around in their never-ending action sports pursuits!

About the Company:



Thinking Adrenaline is a premier consultancy in the surf and adventure park industry, headquartered in Dubai and led by globally awarded CEOs Damon Tudor and Craig Stoddart. With over 20 years of combined experience, their team has been instrumental in pioneering and operating world-class surf parks.



Their expertise covers the full spectrum of surf park development—from conceptualisation and site development to operational readiness and commercial strategy. They have a proven track record of raising substantial capital, building high-performing teams, and navigating complex challenges in the surf park sector.

With a global perspective and hands-on experience, Thinking Adrenaline is dedicated to guiding and supporting projects at every stage of development, ensuring innovative, sustainable, and commercially successful outcomes in this rapidly growing industry.

Visit www.thinkingadrenaline.com for more information