



VAST

RESORT

It's big. It's fun. It's got water

slides. The Chickasaw Nation's

newest venture, OKANA

Resort & Indoor Waterpark

in Oklahoma City, has a little

something for everyone no

matter the season.

BY MEGAN ROSSMAN

WATERCOLORS BY AVA LEE

“I’M

FIFTY-TWO-YEARS OLD, AND I RODE water slides for two and a half hours,” says Kelly Collyar.

Exuberant water park endorsements don’t often come from the mouths of middle-aged adults, but Collyar and his family, who live in Norman, already are super fans of OKANA Resort & Indoor Waterpark, the Chickasaw Nation’s \$400 million resort that opened in February 2025 just south of downtown Oklahoma City. Situated next to the First Americans Museum on a hundred-acre plot of land stretching along the Oklahoma River, this growing center for culture and entertainment is known as the Horizons District.

“We dig it there; we’re big OKANA people,” Collyar says. “My twelve-year-old son has really high-functioning autism, and he’s a unique

little man. He fell in love with it. We couldn’t get him out of the wave pool. He felt safe, and we had a really good family experience there.”

In the first two months OKANA was open, Collyar went three times—twice with his family, which included a return bash for his son’s thirteenth birthday, and once when he organized a semi-annual work retreat.

“We’ve done lots of different team-building events and activities,” Collyar says. “You can go the lame route and just sit in a conference room all day and have dinner brought in. But for me, culture is an important part of our team. So we try to look for things to do where we can bond—and what better way than to wrap your legs around somebody like your boss and go down a waterslide in a bathing suit?”



WHETHER IT’S COLLEAGUES AT A CONFERENCE or families looking for a good time, crowds of all kinds have heard the OKANA siren song. Construction began

in October 2022, and now, the resort—a long-term vision of Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby—finally is a concrete piece of Oklahoma City’s skyline, with a projected economic impact of \$97 million for the city in its first year and a billion-dollar impact over the next decade. Along with the boost it brings to the city, revenue generated by OKANA will help fund programs and services for Chickasaw Nation citizens, including healthcare and education.

“It took a lot of hard work, it took some dedication, and it took cooperation of many people for us to get here, from the city and the state to the architects, engineers, construction workers, and a long list of partners who contributed their support and expertise to make this vision a reality,” Anoatubby said at the ribbon-cutting ceremony February 21. “Together, we’ve transformed this site from an old oil field to a vibrant world-class entertainment and cultural destination that will complement and support the success of the First Americans Museum and further showcase the rich cultures and traditions of Oklahoma tribes. . . . It’s remarkable what we can accomplish when we work together. . . . Partnerships mean so much no matter what we do. OKANA is a shining testament to that.”

With weekend water park passes selling out weeks in advance since its opening, the resort already is off to a good start in its first year, as families such as Collyar’s and others discover the wide appeal of its offerings.

“Families are our bread and butter, but because of how OKANA was developed, we’re seeing a nice blend across the board. We really tried to think about offering fun for all ages,” says director of marketing Laura Rudicel. “That intentionality and thoughtfulness for every kind of age group is something you’ll find throughout the water park.”

That water park is a behemoth play-space that really does have something for every age, whether it’s adrenaline-happy adolescents or recliner-ready grandparents. The entire indoor complex encompasses four-and-a-half acres of waterslides, obstacle courses, ziplines, games, lounging areas, cabanas, and pools. Inside the two-story, 100,000



With fifteen water slides, pools, rides, lounge areas, and concessions, visitors at the indoor waterpark will find it easy to stay all day.



Though the outdoor area is more relaxation-forward, adventurous guests can cruise down two water slides.



Whether guests are in a pool, restaurant or their room, they’ll have access to plenty of cocktails and mocktails around the resort.



The 100,000 square foot indoor water park features luxury cabanas and premium seating.

OKANA RESORT & INDOOR WATERPARK

square-foot indoor portion of the park, shallow wading areas provide a safe space for even the smallest guests to splash around with Mom or Dad, while Soothing Springs is a twenty-one-and-up pool conveniently located next to the indoor Dive Bar, which serves spiked libations. Meanwhile, guests can take a leisurely float down the Enchanted River, get stoked in the FlowRider surf simulator, or rocket their way through all manner of slides and tunnels, including Oklahoma's only water-propelled coaster. When hunger strikes, several fast-casual restaurants offer pizza, burgers, sandwiches, and Asian-inspired

rice and noodle bowls. And every day of the year, the indoor park temperature remains steady between eighty-two and eighty-four degrees—a warm respite for the winter and a cool relief for hot summer days. Outside, no matter the temperature, the vibe tends more toward a chill oasis. “The indoor has the thrills, and you don’t have as many out here,” says Rudicel. “We have some, sure, but everything else is a little more soothing and relaxing and more focused on lounging.” There’s a bouncy obstacle course, a zipline, a couple of waterslides, and the

Okasis Swim-Up Bar, to name a few crowd-pleasers, but the main attraction is the outdoor lagoon. Ensconced within a real sand beach, it measures around a whopping 64,000 square feet, filled to the brim with 1.3 million gallons of water, making it the fourth-largest constructed pool in the entire country. Here, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, swimmers can sink their toes into the sand and submerge their cares away. Thirty-six outdoor cabanas and premium seating options—both inside and out—add another layer of luxury to the lolling. Each covered cabana includes a television, refrigerator, cozy furniture,

waiter service, and a special dining menu, so guests can laze comfortably for the entire day.



WATER INDISPUTABLY RULES AT OKANA, but there are plenty of terrestrial comforts beyond the resort pools. The eleven-story hotel tower contains 404 colorful suites with views of the pool or the Oklahoma River and downtown Oklahoma City. Pieces by local Chickasaw artists like Brent Greenwood and Joyce Nevaquaya-Harris, to name only a couple, overlook plush bedding and com-

fortable living areas in every room, along with standard amenities like mini-fridges, safes, wi-fi, USB charging ports, and flat-screen televisions. When guests choose to leave the snugness of their beds, they’ll find no shortage of sustenance throughout the resort. Jack Rabbit, the place’s sleekest, most upscale restaurant, serves everything from filet mignon and chicken-fried Wagyu to a guest-favorite breakfast buffet. Nearby, Chido Tacos X Tequila brings *comidas ricas* with Mexican staples like birria, tacos, seafood, and a variety of tequilas and drinks. OKANA Candy Co. satisfies sweet cravings with an array of



MEGAN ROSSMAN

GALLERY VIEW

Exhibit C finds a new home in the Horizons District.

Those in search of an artful outing will find a welcoming destination at Exhibit C Gallery, located just down the sidewalk from OKANA’s main entrance. Situated in Bricktown for a decade, the gallery reopened in a brand new 10,000 square-foot building this March, which more than doubled its space.

The gallery displays the work of more than eighty artists from multiple tribes and nations, including a number of Chickasaws like Mike Larsen, Paul Moore, and Margaret Roach Wheeler.

For more information, call (405) 767-8900 or visit exhibitcgallery.com.



Oka (Water) by Rhiana Deck



The Chido taco salad is one of a variety of dishes served at Chido Tacos X Tequila.



From brisket-topped deviled eggs to trash can nachos, Smokehouse Social has a barbecue dish for every taste.

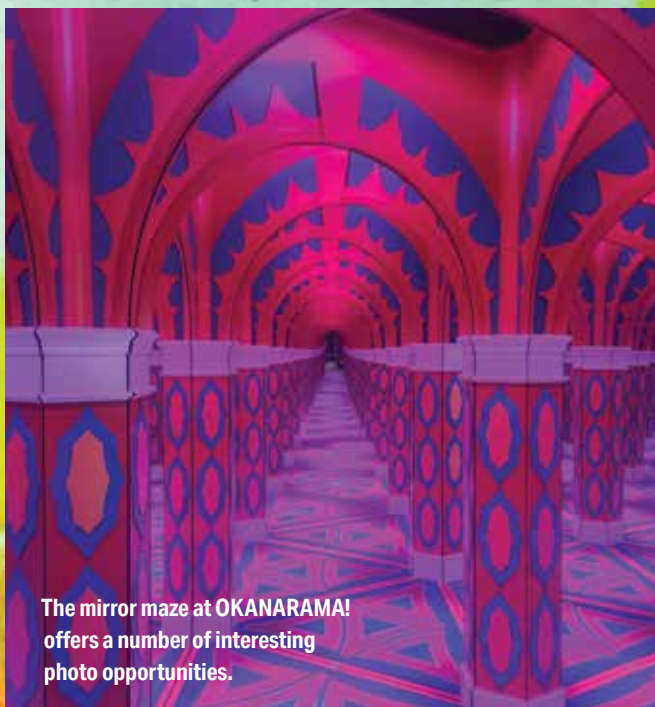
The outdoor lagoon at OKANA is massive. Whether guests just want to lay by the pool or get in a serious swim, the options are plenty at this watery oasis.



ALL IMAGES: OKANA RESORT & INDOOR WATERPARK



OKANA RESORT & INDOOR WATERPARK



The mirror maze at OKANARAMA! offers a number of interesting photo opportunities.

MEGAN ROSSMAN



After they splash the day away, guests can cozy up in well-appointed hotel rooms.

SAXON SMITH

sugary options including ice cream and milkshakes. In two buildings near the hotel's entrance, visitors find Smokehouse Social—a barbecue joint with dishes like beef short ribs and burnt-end queso—and Curveball Kitchen, a baseball-centric eatery outfitted with game simulators and elevated stadium food.

It takes a dedicated culinary staff to keep things running smoothly across the resort. Operated by Pyramid Global Hospitality, which oversees food and beverage services in high-end resorts around the country, the cuisine at OKANA was conceived to satisfy picky palates whether they belong to discerning foodies or nugget-munching juveniles.

The enthusiasm for good food and attention to detail in the menu planning is evident when talking to Jason Jonilonis, director of culinary at OKANA, who lists some of his favorite dishes with zeal, from the braised bone-in short ribs in a red wine reduction demi-glace to Dump Truck Chicken Strips with fries, served in a souvenir toy truck to the delight young diners like his own grandsons.

"We've got Irish nachos at Jack Rabbit, which are malted vinegar-flavored potato chips with griddled pastrami and pickled red onions, jalapeños, and white cheddar cheese sauce," he says. "We've done a lot of these things that are fun and approachable. I don't know if you saw the mac and cheese balls?"



WHILE FEW CAN ARGUE WITH THE inherent thrill of deep-fried mac and cheese, Melissa Roberts wants people to know that the fun doesn't end with food. In fact, that's her job. Roberts is the resort's director of fun. After decades of working in theater and as a performer and entertainment manager for cruise lines, the Oklahoma City native returned to her home state to exercise her skills at OKANA, taking on the role of planning events and activities for visitors. She's on staff to make sure everyone who comes here has a good time.

"It's basically a place where you can do whatever you want," she says. "There's something for everybody. We want to be almost like a cruise ship, where you don't have to leave."

Even the briefest glance at OKANA's online event calendar is proof of how busy Roberts and her team—they call themselves the Hype Crew—have been programming the space. Water balloon fights, scavenger hunts, and limbo showdowns happen on the regular. For a softer pace, crafting is always on the itinerary, too, with drop-in classes where guests learn to make aquariums, suncatchers, friendship bracelets, kites, and more. Roberts and her team also book musicians and other local acts—from stilt walkers to bubble artists—to perform throughout the resort, and they're making plans for future festivals and Friday Night Fire Shows at the outdoor pool. Along with organized amusements, guests can keep the dopamine flowing with more than a hundred arcade games, virtual reality experiences and sports simulators, escape rooms, and a glowing neon mirror maze in the OKANARAMA! game hall.

If all of that seems a little overstimulating, there's help for that, too, because OKANA has a full-service day spa. In this kingdom of amenities, how could it not? Deep-tissue massages, facials, scrubs, wraps, and waxes all are on the menu, or even just a classic mani-pedi with a skin-smoothing paraffin dip.

There is undoubtedly a lot packed into this forty-acre getaway. The beauty is that visitors can choose to do as much—or as little—as they want while they're here, and it's open to everyone. While a certain number of water park passes are reserved for hotel guests, it's not necessary to book a room to get day-passes or eat at many of the restaurants if an overnight stay isn't in the cards. If someone wants to gnaw on smoked beef shank at Smokehouse Social or exchange Monday morning spreadsheets for a little PTO by the pool, they now can turn that I-40 commute into an easy escape. ■

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639 First Americans Boulevard
in Oklahoma City
(572) 228-4001
okanaresort.com