

Out and Back - September 2013

OUT&BACK News Editor Keith Miller goes around the world to bring the industry to you

Billy Beez: A Buzzworthy New FEC Concept

In an industry populated with family entertainment centers (FECs) boasting the latest in electronic arcade games, mini-golf courses, and indoor and outdoor go-kart tracks and amusement rides, one company is seizing the opportunity to fill a void in vigorous play options for kids by introducing a simple but unique concept.



Billy Beez is a growing chain of indoor recreation facilities for children ages 2 to 12 primarily offering soft-play entertainment. Themed around a family of very active and friendly honeybees that live in a rainforest, the centers are filled with three-dimensional elements, colorful murals, and huge play structures built around a maze of tall, wildly twisting slides. Dozens of activities encourage physical, mental, and social development through play as kids climb, jump, crawl, and play sports, getting exercise while learning to play with other kids.

Arabian Centres Real Estate Company in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, has 13 shopping malls in the Middle East and is the parent company of Billy Beez, with six locations currently operating and five in development, including three in Saudi Arabia and two in the United States.

Simon Wilcock, CEO of Arabian Centres, explains how Billy Beez came about: “We had no particular desire to copy the traditional FECs that are out there, so we thought about the corporate social responsibility aspect, which is quite strong in Saudi Arabia. We looked at having places that are not all about electronic games, but directed toward health, well-being, exercise, and physical activity. When you’re playing a video game, you’re either playing by yourself or maybe with one other kid, but at Billy Beez, you’re playing with many other kids and getting the social aspect.”

He says summer temperatures in Saudi Arabia exceed 120 degrees, so having kids running around outside wasn’t feasible. Arabian Centres targeted its optimum indoor space at between 16,000 and 22,000 square feet, and he notes that International Play Company has provided invaluable consultation on the appropriate activities, games, and attractions for the centers.

Wilcock says one element that makes Billy Beez centers in Saudi Arabia different from FECs in the United States and other countries is that parents are allowed to leave their children and go to a restaurant or go shopping. So the centers have controlled entrances and exits, and the children are closely supervised within the facilities.

Another significant distinction between Billy Beez centers and traditional FECs, according to Wilcock, is value. “At a traditional FEC, you might get half an hour of entertainment for \$20, whereas at Billy Beez you can get unlimited play for \$25,” he says. “Parents love the idea that they can take their kids into a safe-play environment, and it’s great value for the money.”

The company has several more elaborate play opportunities in development for kids, including a scavenger-hunt game where they will be given clues to finding special “jewels of the rainforest” placed throughout the centers. The jewels light up when kids find them, and their scores are kept in a personal game account, which they can redeem for discounts or merchandise.

Currently all of the Billy Beez locations are company owned, and though Arabian Centres is considering future franchising, Wilcock says the concept isn’t mature enough yet. Looking ahead, Billy Beez projects to have as many as 20 locations open by the end of 2016.

www.billybeez.com

