

Entertainment & Travel JOURNAL

Don't wait until Christmas to visit Santa Claus

By STEPHANIE EDWARDS
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Every town needs a hero, and one Southern Indiana town's name-sake is admired by every child and many adults around the world.

Santa Claus, Ind., is the only town in the world that bears the jolly old guy's name, and therefore, gets thousands upon thousands of letters and wish lists each year.

But Santa can't answer all of these letters by himself. He has a great group of volunteers: none other than Santa's Elves.

The town was founded in 1840 by German immigrants. Residents applied for a name through the United States Postal Service. The name they requested, Santa Fe, Ind., had already been taken.

According to legend, the perplexed residents were sitting around on



Photo by Becky Higdon

This jolly holiday scene features a Santa Suit worn by Jim Yellig, who was known as Santa Claus in Santa Claus, Ind. Today, the suit, as well as other artifacts from Yellig's colorful career as St. Nick are on display at the Santa Claus Museum.

a natural tourist destination. Attorney Milton Harris recognized this, and in the mid 1930s, he

Visitors were able to watch the toy makers in action. In other words, kids of all ages could enjoy meeting Santa and his friendly helpers even during summer months.

Today, this castle is known as Santa's Candy Castle, where children and adults alike can marvel at handcrafted candies and goodies, several of which are named after Santa's reindeer. The Comet Bar, for example is a coconut filled chocolate candy and the Cupid Bar, which has plenty of marshmallowy goodness.

A definite favorite at the castle are the 31 flavors of candy canes, featuring flavors from the traditional peppermint to Smarties, which have a similar taste to the tart fruity candies.

Candy canes can be purchased individually or in a bundle of a dozen different flavors. Believe it or not, it's hard to choose just 12.

Another popular item is the castle's signature hot chocolate.

Whether you prefer your cocoa to have a simple but decadent chocolate flavor or something a little more

exotic like cheesecake or crème brulee, you will find something warm and comforting. That is unless it's summer.

During the warmer months, guests can try a cool and refreshing treat — frozen hot chocolate. This may seem like an oxy moron, but somehow, the magic of Santa's Candy Castle manages to capture the cocoa taste in a frozen confection.

Plus, the employees swear that Santa took all of the calories out of everything so you can indulge your cravings without feeling guilty.

Children visiting the castle can write a letter to Santa Claus and send it to him, as well as participate in computer-based activities that help them make sure they stay on the "good list."

About 10 years after the creation of the castle, Evansville industrialist Louis J. Koch decided it was time to open the world's first theme park — Santa Claus Land. This simple park featured toy displays, the Santa Claus Land Train, a food and souvenir shop and a place for children to meet Santa Claus.

The theme park expanded over the years and park owners added additional sections of the park that related to other

lazy rivers to daredevil rides that twist, turn and plunge riders into raging water.

The history of the city's many jolly places, people and events is displayed at the Santa Claus Museum.

One of the featured people is Jim Yellig, who according to local residents never played the role of Santa Claus; he was Santa Claus. His red and white suit and the furniture and backdrop used for his set where children visited him at Santa Claus Land are on display.

Yellig was in the Navy during WWI, and he made a promise to God that if he returned home safely, he would do something to give back to his community. He took on the role of Santa Claus and made children's dreams come true on a daily basis.

He was featured in parades and various Christmastime events



Photo by Becky Higdon

Children can send their Christmas wishes to Santa Claus.

Christmas Eve, heard sleigh bells ringing, and the children of the town exclaimed, "It's Santa Claus!"

Because of their reaction, the adult residents decided to give their town a name that would keep the Christmas spirit alive all year long.

With a name like Santa Claus, the town became

built a castle where visitors could be transported to the North Pole. This attraction also enticed famous candy and toy companies — like the creators of Butterfinger and Baby Ruth candy bars, Lionel Trains, Daisy Air Rifles and Strombecker Doll Furniture — to build factories in the town.



Photo by Becky Higdon

Handmade candies of every flavor imaginable can be purchased at Santa's Candy Castle.

holidays — 4th of July, Thanksgiving and Halloween. The park is now known as Holiday World, where guests can ride three of the world's top roller coasters and the world's tallest water ride.

The water park was added in 1987 and features everything from

around the country. He continued visiting with children until he was 90 years old, just months before his death. To put it simply, to the town of Santa Claus, Ind., Jim Yellig was one of the town's greatest heroes.

For more information, visit the Web site — www.legendaryplaces.com. ■

Holiday World is fun for the whole family



Photos by Stephanie Edwards

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Imagine a world without Disneyland or any other amusement park.

That was the American way of life prior to 1946, the year when Evansville, Ind., industrialist Louis J. Koch had the vision and determination to open the world's first theme park — Santa Claus Land.

This small theme park included a toy shop, children's rides and visits with Santa Claus.

People from around the world came to see St. Nick and his crew. Thanks to the Koch family's strong customer service values, the park continued to grow.

Koch's son, Bill took over running the park following WWII and remained active in running the business until he died in 2001.

Now, Bill's son, Will, is the park's president and CEO. Although Bill's wife, Pat, can be seen walking around the park grounds doing every-

thing from picking up trash to helping guests.

In 1984, the Koch family added Halloween and 4th of July sections to the park and changed its name to Holiday World. A Thanksgiving section was added in in 2006.

So whatever holiday is your favorite, you can completely immerse yourself in everything that it encompasses. Restaurants, rides and gift shops have all been tailored to fit each of the holiday themes.

For example, the Thanksgiving section features the Plymouth Rock Café, which serves up delicious comfort foods like turkey legs, dressing, chicken and dumplings and fried chicken.

If you're looking for a little bit of roller coaster action, this is the perfect place. Riders can expect several intense drops, including one that sends them spiraling down 154 feet at a 66-degree angle.

The Voyage has been named the World's #1 Roller Coaster by

"Amusement Today Magazine."

Of course, there are plenty of other award-winning rides in the other sections of the park.

But if the truly frightening is what you are seeking, Thanksgiving's Pilgrim's Plunge the world's tallest water ride, can live up to the challenge. It's a classic "shoot the chute" ride, with an open elevator that lifts riders inside boats 135 feet into the air. Then, it sends riders plunging down a water slide from 131 feet in the air at a 45-degree angle.

Pilgrim's Plunge can also be reached from Splashin' Safari, Holiday World's companion water park, which was added in 1993. The water park features two lazy rivers, two wave pools and numerous intimidating waterslides with names like the ZOOMbabwe and the Bakuli.

One of the wonderful things about visiting Holiday World and Splashin' Safari is that all

soft drinks, inner tube usage and sunscreen are completely free. No worrying about having to pay \$5 or more per soda. Anyone who has ever been to an amusement park knows that this is a great bonus.

Parents wanting a completely worry-free visit can pick up Phone

Find wrist bands, write their cell phone numbers on them and place them on their children's wrists. If a child is lost during their visit, a park employee will have a way to reach the child's parents.

For more information, visit the Web site — www.holidayworld.com. ■

The 411 on Santa Claus, Ind.

Directions from Knoxville:

- Make your way to I-75 N and continue for 172.2 miles (crossing into Kentucky)
- Merge onto I-64 W toward Frankfort/Louisville and continue for 135.1 miles
- Take Exit 63, turn left onto Highway 162 and continue driving for seven miles.

Important contact information

- General tourism information: www.legendaryplaces.com
- Santa's Candy Castle: (812) 544-3900 or www.santasandycastle.com
- Holiday World and Splashin' Safari: (812) 937-4401 or www.holiday-world.com
- Santa Claus Museum: (812) 937-2687 or www.santaclausmuseum.org