



Orca Coast Playground's customized indoor playgrounds, such as this one at **Charlie's Safari** fun center in Lacey, Wash., and soft-play installations have made physical activity more imaginative for kids, while giving operators profits and parents peace of mind.

# Playground of Possibilities

## Orca Coast Specializes in Custom Indoor Attractions

Indoor playgrounds are more than just child's play.

Top-of-the-line varieties are customized feats of architectural design and detail with safety factored into every square foot, all giving way to an experience that engages kids' imaginations as much as it works their bodies.

Orca Coast Playground, the manufacturer founded by playground industry vets Bill Dunbar and Rey Estanislao, has been raising that bar even higher. Now

designing, building and installing approximately 50 structures per year, with over 10 million kids reportedly tearing through their systems annually, Dunbar and Estanislao are keeping pace with new FEC commissions while expanding into new territory.

"Coming from a construction and design background, we're not businessmen out to make money but to bring service and safety back to the industry," said Dunbar, describing the marketplace

needs that he and Estanislao felt could be better addressed after their tenures at Prime Play, Soft Play and International Play. In fact, they have now capped projects at \$5 million per year in order to maintain customer service and the integrity of the development process.

"Beyond \$5 million, you start to lose control of the product, and your overhead becomes massive. We are looking at ways to expand without having to extend our capacity."



Another **safari themed play unit**, one of the most popular customizing options, leaps from original computer design into physical reality.



For the last several years, the FEC market has been the main one to grow. Orca Coast has grown from literally a backyard operation with seven projects into a top firm in their field, occupying a 10,000-sq.-ft. facility in Vancouver with 24 employees. An in-house creative design company called Safe Structures has just been added with five artists focused exclusively on everything from “Disney-quality-theming to basic, 2-D, budgetary theming,” said Dunbar.

Playground personalities are unlimited, from the favorite African safari (seen on grand display at Charlie’s Safari fun center in Lacey, Wash.) and space designs to fantasy islands and Honey, I Shrunk the Kids-like setups. One of the largest indoor playgrounds for the YMCA chapter in Chattanooga celebrates Tennessee’s great outdoors and history. Designs can go through as many drafts as the client wants before finalizing. Like themes and the kids for whom they’re intended, playgrounds come in all shapes and sizes with a variety of activity stations inside, including moon

walks, log squeezes, jump pads and hand-over-hand climbing, each promoting upper body skills and dexterity.

“Our average customer will spend \$100,000 to \$150,000 for a playground that will hold 160 to 170 children,” said Dunbar. “That would have a footprint of probably 2,200- to 2,600-sq. ft., though we have done them as small as 120 sq. ft., which would be a toddler playground. The biggest is about 4,500 sq. ft. Heights will range from 8’ high to 36’; the first level is usually 7’ high, then 4’ for higher levels.”

All are built following in-house principles known as SAVE (safety, accessibility, visibility and excitement). Safety protocols constitute all verti-

cal construction, which spreads the weight while reducing sway and wear on nuts and bolts. Other aspects include padding all steel surfaces, padded panels at slide and elevation changes to prevent falls and deter bad collisions, fir plywood construction for durability of decks and product liability insurance. To date, Orca Coast has never had a lawsuit.

“We’re not only thinking of the child but thinking of the parent since they are giving our customers money,” said Dunbar. “Accessibility from a parent’s standpoint is paramount. When you have a very large footprint four feet high, you better be able to access that kid in 30 seconds or less. We have set that as our bar, so there’s adult-easy access at any point.” Visibility goes hand in hand with that feature, so vantage points are planned in for spotting kids from below, and enclosed tubes are only used for certain slides because they obstruct sight lines and limit air flow.

The excitement, of course, is easy to witness in action. That also includes a thrill of recognition in FEC owners of the amount of activity and earning potential a unit has vis a vis its price point, which is kept down thanks largely to manufacturing policies, according to Dunbar.

“We actually manufacture in the old-fashioned way,” Dunbar explained, also noting their comparatively low overheads. “We pre-manufacture and assemble the equipment to make sure that we avoid any onsite problems.” Playgrounds are 50% assembled in Vancouver, then taken apart and shipped to FECs. The assembly crew arrives onsite early for a fi-



Playground industry veterans **Rey Estanislao (left)** and **Bill Dunbar** wanted to improve customer service, safety and cost when combining talents to form Orca Coast.





Orca Coast's latest cost-effective endeavor, **Frag Zone Battle Arenas**, which are fully rubberized laser tag setups, have been installed in two facilities and counting.

nal inspection and spends about two-and-a-half weeks constructing the playground on average; smaller structures have taken a matter of days, the largest five weeks. Dunbar continued, "We have roughly four crews in our factory. The guys that build it here are the exact ones who go to the source. There are gray areas with someone else manufacturing and more room for error, so they take full responsibility for the project."

Orca Coast plans to continue developing the FEC environment with two new product endeavors. The first is making lasertag arenas out of high-quality plastics. "We can customize multi-level structures in a large-scale arena with all glow-in-the dark theming for 40% less than what they're paying now," Dunbar stated, explaining that's partly because they do the assembly, not a local contractor. Two of these fully-rubberized, padded installations called Frag Zone Battle Arena have opened at Charlie's Safari and Funworld Family Play Center in Surrey, B.C. One novel idea is a WWII theme in which bombed-out buildings can be climbed inside to get better shots. "We're delivering a previously unreachable product, increasing the quality and putting the cost at very attainable levels," said Dunbar.

The next concept is a toddler village, addressing what they perceive as a need for more creative setups for the very

young. For example, villages will be themed with an Old America look complete with city hall, banks, roads, markets and so on to inspire fantasy play. Customization makes for nearly unlimited manifestations like, say, a Mayan village.

Outside of this market, Orca Coast has proudly rolled out their Therapeutic Original Playground System (TOPS) designed especially for clinics conducting play therapy for children with autism. An occupational therapist and teacher



Fresh off the drawing board, **the kinder city** idea for bringing Orca Coast's vision to toddler attractions will be developed into 2009.

has joined the Orca Coast team to spearhead the placement of these playgrounds with features and exercises unique to those with learning needs.

Like the orcas who the firm has associated itself, known for their playful, interactive quality, Orca Coast plans to migrate south. More sales people are being added throughout South America to further extend their sales territory south of both borders. There's no better time to do so, concluded Dunbar. "Even in this economic downturn, we've had our best year yet," he said. "People will always pay for their children to enjoy having a good time."

For more information, find Orca Coast online at [www.orcacoastplay.com](http://www.orcacoastplay.com) and call 604/ 719- 6277.



A **mining theme** brings to life this smaller corner indoor playground.