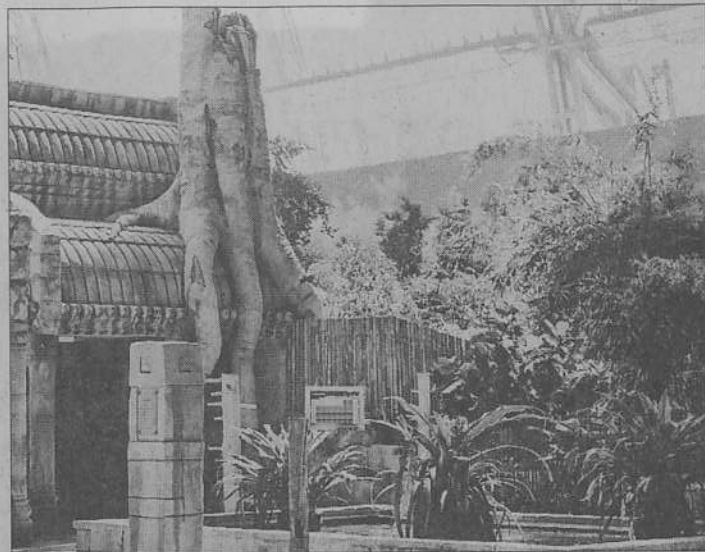


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A watery paradise plopped onto the German landscape

A barefoot-friendly 700,000 square feet of tropical pleasures fill an exotic Xanadu



TROPICAL ISLANDS

The saunas at Tropical Islands water park, including one modeled after Angkor Wat, are meant to be enjoyed "as nature intended."

By SCOTT VOGEL

LA TIMES-WASHINGTON POST

It was never supposed to be the world's largest indoor water park, much less a parable for our times, a cautionary tale on the perils of dreaming big. No one was clamoring for an artificial biosphere so enormous that the Statue of Liberty could stand upright in it or the Eiffel Tower lie on its side. And even if they had been clamoring for it, no one would have built it here, in the German countryside somewhere between Berlin and Dresden:

This was land that the Nazi Luftwaffe once used as a training ground for pilots, that the Soviet Union later turned into an East German military base. It was flat and treeless and abandoned in 1998 when a German firm called CargoLifter purchased it with the stated intention of building a massive hangar. The Kublai Khan-worthy plan: to construct a heavy-lift aircraft, "heavy-lift" as in having a loading bay capable of carrying "a diesel locomotive engine (120 tons) and a humpback whale (40 tons)," according to the book "International Logistics" by Douglas Long, which unfortunately does not go on to explain why you might want to transport both of

those at once.

"Wow." That's all my son, 8, could say as the bus rounded a bend and an enormous elliptical dome appeared in the distance.

"Yeah, um, wow," I replied.

Awe-inspiring sight

There before us stood hubris of a rare order: 14,000 tons of steel supporting a 700,000-square-foot structure 32 stories high, an aviation Xanadu. Sure, CargoLifter went belly up in 2002, its business plan disintegrating faster than the several Hindenburgs you could fit inside its stately pleasure dome, but still: You'd expect that a scheme equally grandiose, or at the very

least sinister, would have found a home there.

Instead, in 2004 it became a German water park with an English name, Tropical Islands, the moniker apparently lending an extra touch of the exotic for the hordes of Berliners who patronize it. The snow might be piling up against the building's base, but inside is 175 million cubic feet of air kept at a temperature of 79 degrees round-the-clock, 365 days a year, not to mention eight football fields of landscaping made barefoot-friendly by an under-floor heating system.

Just beyond the turnstiles lies a bridge over a swamp heavily stocked with mangroves and paths leading past thousands

Going to the Islands

Tropical Islands (www.tropical-islands.de/en) is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The sauna and spa area is open 9 a.m.-1 a.m. daily. Admission (for both park and spa area) is about \$36 general, \$32 for students and seniors, \$25 for children 4 to 14, free for children 3 and younger. Visitors can stay as long as they like but are assessed a 10-euro fee (about \$12.50) if they stay beyond 3 a.m. The RE2 regional express train runs hourly from the Hauptbahnhof, Berlin's main train station, to the town of Brand (Niederlausitz) and takes about 50 minutes (www.bahn.de). Up to five people can travel together for one round-trip fare, which starts at \$33 on weekdays. Tropical Islands operates free buses from the train station to the park.

of specimens of tropical flora. Densely planted coffee bushes and banana trees conspired to create a remarkably realistic jungle, the effect spoiled only by the sound of flip-flops and the occasional bad European bathing suit.

have included the show "Myths of the South Seas," which "tells the story of man's bitter struggle for survival and his desire for immortality," in terms that Cirque du Soleil fans will instantly understand.)

Ocean floor of steel

Deep and dark it was, the palms overhead eventually obscuring the sky, until they stopped obscuring it and a great ceruleanness came into view. An azure screen, of course, dotted with Magritte-style clouds and mounted over a tropical sea called Tropical Sea. Germans of all ages frolicked in the sand nearby, while others camped overnight in canvas tents (just \$30 a person for a pallet with high-thread-count sheets). The attraction, in addition to the sea itself, with its stainless-steel ocean floor, is the pair of sandbars floating on it. Both are magically transformed each evening from entertaining schmaltz islands to islands of schmaltz entertainment. (Past offerings

When in Rome ...

Alas, one martini provided insufficient ballast for the park's spa and sauna area, which occupies a generous one-third of Tropical Islands' real estate. Like the Frontierlands and Toon-Towns of other parks, this center of "wellness" represents a clear departure from the adjacent neighborhood. As a bonus, it also provides the occasion for a teachable moment on American prudery.

"It's like Naked Town," my son said.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it," I speedily replied, my delivery oddly listless, owing to the concurrent sighting of a naked 75-year-old man bounding happily into a steam bath patterned after the Elephanta Temple in India.

"Then why don't we do it?"

"We just don't do it."

At that moment, I found myself locking eyes with a middle-aged woman wearing an irritated, just-take-'em-off-already stare but nothing else. For my part, I countered with a Jane Goodall look of detached curiosity and a pair of hibiscus-print trunks. There would be no common ground here, I concluded, slipping away to the temple.

We were stopped at the door. Not only was wearing anything more than a towel in the temple a fashion faux pas, an attendant told us, but it was also unhygienic and disallowed.

A matter of chauvinism

Now, admittedly, I've never been a big fan of this particular pair of hibiscus-print trunks, but they hardly seemed awful enough to inspire such a level of chauvinism.

"We prefer that you experience the spa as nature intended," said a gentle-voiced young man when we sought explanation.

"As nature intended," I said.

"Yes."

And with that, we stumbled back to the jungle, past the Angkor Wat stone sauna, the herbal sweat lodge inspired by Lakota shamans, the New Zealand Waiotapu Thermal Reserve hot tubs. The palm trees in the distance were glowing in the setting sun, and the low hum of stadium lights was just becoming audible.