

AWARD WINNING GILA BEND KOA TO BECOME SONORAN DESERT RV PARK

After a successful five-year run, the award-winning Gila Bend KOA is leaving the Kampgrounds of America franchise network and become the Sonoran Desert RV Park effective September 1.

“The decision to leave the KOA franchise network was not an easy one,” said Scott Swanson, who co-owns and operates the campground with his mother and business partner, Sandy Catalana.

“We are grateful to KOA for giving us an incredible opportunity to transform an underdeveloped independent campground into one of the top five KOA campgrounds in North America. But we’re at point now where we are ready to take our next steps with more creative control over everything from our website, reservation system and branding to the types of amenities we provide.”

Swanson and Catalana previously co-owned and operated Leaf Verde RV Resort 35 miles to the North in Buckeye, with 16 other family members and sold Leaf in 2016. In 2015 the two purchased Augie’s Quail Trail RV Park.

After purchasing Augie’s, Swanson and Catalana quickly improved the park and were able to join the KOA network, which helped them tremendously with their initial marketing efforts.

“We knew we were taking a risk by purchasing this property in Gila Bend due to its remote location and its limited resources for visitors without even a grocery store in town,” Swanson recalled. “But with the KOA brand, logo, marketing, and KOA’s reputation, we were able to get our business off the ground.”

Swanson and his mother have spent close to \$1 million in improvements at the Gila Bend KOA, which ranked 4th place in guest satisfaction reviews out of over 500 KOAs in North America, according to KOA’s 2019 market group report released to KOA

owners, up from 5th place the year before. The Gila Bend KOA was also honored with KOA's 2018 Rising Star Award, which is presented annually to a campground that has less than five years in the KOA system and is off to a fast start with growth, investment, high guest service scores and revenue.

Business has been so promising at the Gila Bend KOA that Swanson and his mother purchased the 20-acre parcel next door with plans to build another RV Park, the future Red Barn RV Park Gila Bend. "It will cater to the more budget-minded RV traveler for short-term and long-term guests with basically no amenities, just a place to park with full hook-ups," Swanson stated, adding, "With Holt's Shell selling its business that included RV sites, we are wanting to fill that need for more affordable RV sites in Gila Bend." The planning stages of the project was put on hold this past March when the pandemic hit, but they hope to get back together with their engineers and Town officials as soon as they are able to feel out the market during this unpredictable time. In the meantime, they have cleaned up the property of overgrown weeds and debris as well as painting the existing barn and stable for much better curb appeal from Butterfield Trail.

Sonoran Desert RV Park, for its part, has 122 full hookup RV Sites, four deluxe patio sites, two with private dog runs called The PEThouse Suites, and four deluxe tent sites. Among the park's carefully thought out amenities are a heated swimming pool, a large recreation room, an outdoor Veranda, laundry facilities with a clothesline, a restroom/shower building, a putting green, a horseshoe pit, and a petanque court. There are two small outdoor fenced-in "solitary confinement" areas for a party of one to read, relax, or meditate. It is labeled as the Solitary Confinement — "a place to send your spouse when they need a time-out!" There is a large dog park with three separate corrals, including two with grass. The larger corral is for social dogs and the other two are for unsocial dogs and/or their unsocial owner. During the busy winter months, November thru March, the park offers organized activities with an activity staff.