Roadside Stopper: Can Something Be Too Big in Texas?

Giant Buc-ee's Convenience Store Offers 80 Soda Dispensers; No Semis Allowed

By Miguel Bustillo

Sept. 12, 2012 10:32 p.m. ET

Everything is bigger in Texas, including the bountiful bathrooms at Buc-ee's, a chain of excessively large roadside rest stops.

But since Arch "Beaver" Aplin opened his most humongous Buc-ee's pit stop yet this year, some rivals and bemused travelers are saying that even in the Lone Star State, there may be such a thing as too big.

Billed as the world's largest convenience store, the 67,000-square-foot colossus on Interstate 35 between Austin and San Antonio is 20 times the size of a 7-Eleven and longer than a football field. It features 60 gasoline pumps, 80 soda dispensers, 31 cash registers, 23 flavors of fudge and entire aisles devoted to varieties of popcorn and beef jerky.

The pièce de résistance: 84 gleaming toilets, each with its own dispenser of hand sanitizer and shined at all hours by a small army of attendants.

"I wanted to build a facility that was bigger than need be," Mr. Aplin says of his creation, which looks like a Circle K designed by Willy Wonka. "But I have to admit I'm a little nervous. Did I overdo it this time?"

America has a tradition of quirky roadside stops. In California, Pea Soup Andersen's, north of Santa Barbara, has been beckoning drivers to pause for big bowls of split-pea soup for more than 85 years. In the Midwest, the Iowa 80 truck stop claims to be the king of all 18-wheeler hangouts—and sports a barbershop, movie theater and dental clinic. Near the boundary between the Carolinas, a rest stop called South of the Border entices travelers with a 200-foot sombrero tower and a mustachioed mascot named Pedro.

With its flat, expansive highways, Texas is a dream for devotees of roadside attractions. Perhaps the most famous is the Cadillac Ranch along Interstate 40 west of Amarillo: a public art display of 10 half-buried automobiles in brightly painted hues.

Texas is also famously fond of bigness. The North Star Mall in San Antonio features the "Giant Justins," a pair of 40-foot-tall cowboy boots. Billy Bob's Texas, a country and western nightclub in Fort Worth that encompasses 127,000 square feet, calls itself the "World's Largest Honky Tonk."

Fans have come to expect excess from Buc-ee's, a 26-store chain whose cartoony mascot is a bucktoothed beaver wearing a baseball cap. The stores stock munchies ranging from pickled quail eggs and chickens stuffed with crawfish jambalaya to trademarked caramel-coated corn puffs known as Beaver Nuggets.

But don't call it a truck stop: 18-wheelers are barred because Mr. Aplin says they gum up parking-lot traffic.

"It's up there in terms of Texas culture," says Matthew Carter of Houston, a traveling salesman, well-acquainted with roadside stops. "When you see the options out there, believe me, Buc-ee's looks real good."

Competitors are less impressed, claiming that Mr. Aplin's penchant for porcelain is economically unsustainable.

"I don't sell Beaver Nuggets and I don't need nothing other than the name of my business to get people in the door," says Dudley Wood, owner of Woody's Smokehouse, a stop between Houston and Dallas that bills itself as the "Jerky Capital of the World."

Mr. Aplin, 53 years old, has matured somewhat since his days as a rambunctious boy nicknamed Beaver. Yet he still has a mischievous side: he says he ran with the bulls this summer in Pamplona, Spain, and didn't inform his business partner, Don Wasek, until after the fact. Mr. Wasek declined to comment.

The Texas native, who has a drafting table in his office where he designs his stores, studied to become an architect and was supposed to follow his father into the construction business. But he was envious of a convenience store opened by Mr. Wasek, a childhood friend. So he opened his own three decades ago, calling it Buc-ee's after a hunting dog named Buc. He says it had nothing to do with Stuckey's, the pioneering roadside chain, which operates in 19 states.

Mr. Aplin and Mr. Wasek began building oversize convenience stores with beaver branding along the Gulf Coast. But it wasn't until Buc-ee's hit the highway with a stop between Houston and San Antonio a decade ago that the endeavor truly grew to Texas proportions.

Mr. Aplin says he realized the traveling public would drive a little farther for the promise of a super-scrubbed restroom, after his decision to splurge on bathrooms won Buc-ee's a cult following.

He also says he learned that travelers were willing to buy more snacks and knickknacks, so long as they are unusual—such as fossilized rocks cut in the shape of Texas.

"This here's a straight-up commodity," he says, pointing to a bag of Lay's potato chips. "But where else are you going to get camo corn?" he asks, flagging Buc-ee's camouflage-colored popcorn snacks.

To some, it is becoming a bit much.

"This is almost outrageous," says David Lopez, a San Antonio schoolteacher, pointing to a succession of big metal bins stocked with 20-pound bags of ice outside the giant new store, located in New Braunfels, Texas. "When you have, let me see, about 30 places to get ice alone—that's kind of crazy."

Mr. Aplin declines to share how his megastore is doing, or describe his expectations, saying, "It's impossible to run the numbers on something like this." But he is pulling back a bit: a new location between Houston and Galveston is going to be smaller.

Not that he harbors any regrets. As he strolls through the aisles of the New Braunfels store, tidying up displays of blueberry sour candies and spicy venison sticks, Mr. Aplin is approached by a worker who says visitors are asking Buc-ee's to stock cuts of actual beaver meat. He pauses before deciding it is a bad idea.

He steps outside and proudly stares at a giant bronze statue of the Buc-ee's beaver, as families snap pictures beside it. "Boy, I could stare at that all day," he says.

http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444914904577623862863808508