

SAN DIEGO

Mr. Sandman

THE BENEFITS OF BUILDING CASTLES ON THE BEACH

The Hotel del Coronado, near San Diego, is not an easy building to ignore. Opened in 1888, the property is an eccentric blend of American beach house and Swiss chateau designed to stop people in their tracks. Today, though, its turrets and terraces are going largely unnoticed, thanks to a structure taking shape just outside: a castle with a winding staircase leading up to a battlement, and below that a portcullis, watched over by a monster.

The 5-foot-tall fortification is the work of Bill Pavlacka, a 53-year-old

former construction worker from New Jersey who is entering his fifth year as a professional sand castle builder. His elaborate, gleefully imaginative creations start at \$500 and are in high demand among wedding planners, event companies and guys looking for an unusual way to pop the question. "I'm able to make a bit of money," he says.

With unruly white hair, sun-seasoned skin and a tendency to do handstands without warning, Pavlacka has become something of a celebrity, enough so that Target used his work in a



TV ad. But his prospects weren't always so bright. He stumbled into sand castles after losing his job during the property crunch, he says, a dismal thing to happen to a middle-aged man. One day, a sympathetic friend asked him to build a castle for a party she was throwing, and he enjoyed the work so much he went out and had business cards made.

Since then, Pavlacka has had no problem getting

work. He admits, though, that there are downsides to his job. Toddlers tend to enjoy destroying sand castles; dogs occasionally try to relieve themselves on them. His creations rarely last more than a few days. But for all that, he insists that the recession may have been the best thing that ever happened to him. After all, he says, "I get paid to play at the beach."

—AMY PATUREL