

Polishing for the Inauguration

Washington Is Adding Hotel Rooms and Services

By JANE L. LEVERE

A half dozen or so hotels in Washington are undergoing extensive renovations, in part to take advantage of business related to Inauguration Day. This is good news for executives visiting the city, for any reason.

Two Holiday Inns recently have been rebranded, upgraded and reopened as Thompson and Affinia hotels, while many top luxury hotels, including the Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton, Washington, are undergoing multimillion-dollar facelifts. In addition, a \$100 million renovation of the Marriott Wardman Park, a convention hotel that is the city's largest, was completed in January.

Experts say these changes not only mirror what is happening in the hotel industry nationally, but also reflect a growing sophistication in Washington as a travel destination.

The latest renovations and upgrades "are par for the course," said Jan D. Freitag, a vice president of Smith Travel Research, a lodging research company. "The last couple of years have been very good to hotel owners, so they have money in the bank to spend."

"With a perceived downturn in the economy, the question is how do you keep your hotel attractive to potentially dwindling travelers? That necessitates a renovation," he added.

Michael MacNair, a travel management consultant based in Alexandria, Va., who is helping to plan travel for the campaign of John McCain, also attributes the hotel renovations and upgrades to a "significant revitalization" of Washington, and to the strength of government consulting business.

"When I got here 25 years ago," Mr. MacNair said, "there was the basic Hilton and the basic Sheraton, with no personality. Now, people's tastes have diversified. The average business traveler is looking for a unique experience, and hotels are transforming their product to deliver it."

Another factor behind the renovations, according to Bill Hanbury, chief executive of Destination DC, the city's convention and tourism corporation, is the increase in international visitors to Washington, both for business and pleasure. The city estimates there will be 1.15 million foreign visitors in 2008, up

from one million in 2007.

Increasing competition from new hotels in suburban Washington has added to the pressure in the District of Columbia. Kimpton, which has seven boutique hotels in the district, is expanding in suburban Virginia, while Gaylord Hotels opened a 2,000-room convention hotel in Prince George's County, Md., in April.

The inauguration, of course, is the icing on the cake. The event "puts the city on the map worldwide," said Adriaan Radder, general manager of the Ritz-Carlton, Washington. "Every hotel benefits from the huge demand and has the opportunity to drive higher revenues than would be generated otherwise."

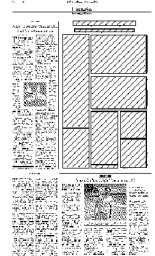
Some of the greatest change has come in the high-end segment. The 28-year-old Four Seasons at Pennsylvania Avenue and M Street Northwest is undergoing a \$40 million renovation, scheduled to be completed by December, that includes a new lobby restaurant, the addition and expansion of guest rooms and the addition of a fifth presidential suite.

The eight-year-old Ritz-Carlton at 22nd and M Streets Northwest is undergoing a \$12 million facelift. Eric Ripert, chef of the New York fish restaurant Le Bernardin, opened the Westend Bistro at the hotel last fall. The hotel's newly renovated club lounge and suites have more contemporary, lighter décor; guest rooms are now being similarly refurbished.

The St. Regis, occupying a 1926 Italian Renaissance-style building at 16th and K Streets Northwest, reopened in January after a \$52.5 million renovation, which includes a refurbished lobby, spa and guest rooms.

Thompson Hotels opened the Donovan House, a luxury boutique hotel, in March in the former Holiday Inn at 14th and M Streets Northwest. It has undergone a renovation that cost more than \$35 million, and its unusual furnishings include egg-shaped chairs suspended from the lobby ceiling, and "cocoon" showers, resembling a nautilus shell, in guest room bathrooms.

Affinia Hotels opened the Liaison Capitol Hill in April, on New Jersey Avenue Northwest between D and E Streets, with 343 guest rooms that have high-tech amenities and contemporary furnishings. The hotel was renovated at a cost



of more than \$12 million, and will get a rooftop pool and lounge next year, and a lobby restaurant this summer.

The \$100 million renovation of the Marriott Wardman Park, at 2660 Woodley Road at Connecticut Avenue Northwest, involved redecorating all 1,316 guest rooms. A steakhouse was added along with a 3,000-square-foot fitness center.

The Georgetown Inn, Hilton Washington and the Jefferson are all planning to refurbish, while W and the team of Marriott and the boutique hotelier Ian Schrage plan to open hotels in Washington. But, with the exception of renovation of the Georgetown Inn, none of this will occur until after the inauguration.

These upgrades and openings are

good news for business travelers because they "raise the bar," said Christopher Hunsberger, general manager of the Four Seasons Hotel Washington D.C. "As one hotel renovates, everyone looks and tries to reassess what they need to do to be competitive. The product offering has gotten substantially better for travelers, the options are greater than ever."

Mr. Radder, for one, said he believed that demand for luxury hotel rooms "has not grown as fast as the supply has increased." This is already translating into some discounts: Donovan House is offering introductory room rates, starting at \$295 a night. After Labor Day, rates will start at \$375.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW COUNCILL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Thompson Hotels has opened the Donovan House, a luxury boutique hotel.



The statue of Gen. George H. Thomas faces the Donovan House.

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