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'Right to the bare walls'

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COVER STORY: It's out with the old, in with the 'wow' at London's Residence Inn by Marriott

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Like a caterpillar in its chrysalis, soon to emerge as a brilliant monarch butterfly, London's Residence Inn by Marriott is undergoing a hidden internal transformation.

The outside of the hotel looks the same, but what's going on inside is a combination of "the intuitive human touch with comforts of home," says general manager Anna McNutt.

"We're going right from top to bottom, right to the bare walls," McNutt says.

Out goes the old look, heavy on green and beige, with portraits of weary-looking flower arrangements drowsing on the walls. In comes a bright, bold new look, resplendent in burgundy and cream, lively carpets and wall art that leans to photos with an abstract feel and sunny Art Deco posters with a flavour of 1920s France.

"We cater to a broad audience," McNutt says. "We have the marathon travellers, families attending sports events, weddings . . ."

". . . and a lot of insurance adjusters handling local claims for damage from fires, accidents and so on," sales director Christopher Bassoo finishes for her.

The biggest suite is some 800 square feet and the family version can sleep six people. "I don't know of any other hotel that offers that," says McNutt. The smallest "studio suite" has about 500 sq. ft. All have huge closets.

"These suites are bigger than my first condo," says Bassoo.

Corner suites have windows on two sides. "No other hotel has so many windows," says McNutt.

"And a lot of customers like to keep them open, even though each suite has its own climate-control system," Bassoo says.

Rooms come in four models, some with king-sized beds, some with twins queens, all with massive headboards that are, in fact, entire walls.



You'd never know it from the outside, but London's Residence Inn by Marriott has a whole new look. (DEREK RUTTAN, Sun Media)

There are full kitchen suites (marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances), free Internet connections and even a grocery-shopping service (just make out your list and your order will be in the fridge or the cupboards when you return from your meeting).

Customer reaction to the new look in suites on the top three floors of the 13-storey building "has been nothing less than the 'wow' factor," McNutt says.

The radical makeover, rumoured to cost something in the vicinity of \$6 million (McNutt won't reveal how much) has kept more than 50 workers in the contract trades busy since February and is slated to be completed by this fall, when the front lobby, dining room and meeting room on the ground floor finish getting the full treatment.

The gym sports a new array of modernistic exercise equipment that appears to have been delivered in a flying saucer.

The whole treatment, down to the last detail, has been mandated specifically by the Marriott's corporate headquarters back in Bethesda, Md., even though the Marriott in London is one of 40 Canadian franchised operations owned by Ocean Properties and managed by Atlific Hotels of Montreal, McNutt explains.

McNutt has been general manager at the hotel since a year after it was first created in what had been an empty building -- dubbed rather unkindly by some "the pink elephant" -- that was completed at the height of a recession in the early 1980s.

"The hotel opened in 1999, so this full makeover is happening on its 10th anniversary. Normally, Marriott does a complete renovation every 12 years with a mid-term freshening up every six years," McNutt says.

Maybe the London Marriott is getting the special treatment as a reward for achieving several milestones in 2008 "when this hotel had the best year ever. Our sales actually grew while other hotels were all suffering losses (in guests)," Bassoo says.

Bassoo was also recognized as direct sales leader of the year among North American Residence Inns, led Marriott Hotels Canada in regional property sales and Marriott International in sales leadership for extended-stay business.

The London hotel also led Marriott Hotels Canada for the highest occupancy for extended-stay visits and the most-improved growth in 2008.

Though green might be out as a major component of the Marriott's new decor, the colour still rates highly with McNutt.

"All our new kitchen appliances and lights are high-efficiency," so they use less electricity, she says, "and during renovations we have recycled everything possible. Chris heads the project.

"We are shipping all of the old cupboards to Guyana for use in hospitals, etc. All the furniture from the suites is being sold or donated," he adds. "Even the discarded pillows have been given to a local lady who makes beds for rabbits from the stuffing."

"All of the floral arrangements are being given to Thames school for their design program. A woman from the school stopped by and we told her to go ahead and take the whole lot," says Bassoo.

The sales director says the hotel has focused on partnerships with local businesses to add value to what it offers travellers.

"We have an arrangement with Inner Insights to provide complimentary 15-minute mini-massages and a partnership with Kettle Creek Golf & Country Club for complimentary memberships. Our guests pay \$28 for a round and use of a golf cart," Bassoo says.

"We partner with Moxie's Classic Grill to provide a free dessert for guests on check-in and a partnership with Robinson Hall that lets our guests in on a VIP access basis -- right to the head of the line -- at no cover charge.

"We do a lot of things differently," he adds. "Anna likes to think outside the box."

THE MARRIOTT MAMMOTH

Marriott International, Inc. traces its heritage to a root beer stand opened in Washington, D.C., in 1927 by J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott. Today, Marriott International has more than 3,200 lodging properties in the U.S. and 66 other countries and territories.

The mammoth chain, headquartered in Bethesda, Md., employs 146,000. It has almost 2,200 properties in North America and another 822 under development.

It operates under a wide umbrella of brand names.

They are (with number of hotels or resorts/rooms in brackets):

- The Ritz-Carlton (36/11,340) "Worldwide symbol for the finest in accommodations, dining, and service."
- Marriott Hotels and Resorts (346/135,451).
- J.W. Marriott Hotels and Resorts (17/8,509) "Most elegant and luxurious Marriott brand."
- Renaissance Hotels and Resorts (79/24,179) "The only boutique-inspired, full service hotel brand."
- Courtyard Suites (754/105,967). Now in 28 countries, just opened new units in Turkey and Russia.
- Fairfield Inn (581/52,071) "Provides business and leisure travellers with everything they need at an exceptional value."
- Springhill Suites (218/25,263). "Inspiring style at an affordable price."
- Residence Inn (574/69,107 rooms) Aimed at long-stay travellers with "fully equipped kitchens, free grocery delivery service."
- Townplace Suites (166/16,645) "All-suite property with full kitchens . . . Lower rates for longer stays."
- Marriott Conference Centres (11 in U.S.) "Specializes in . . . small- to mid-sized meetings . . . latest audiovisual communications technology, experiential learning facilities, gourmet conference dining, golf, recreational/fitness venues."

- Marriott Vacation Club (50 beach, ski and golf resorts) "Recognized global leader in timeshare, providing 395,000 families with a lifetime of unforgettable vacations."
- The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co. "Nearly 70 Ritz-Carlton hotels and resorts locations worldwide."
- The Ritz-Carlton Destination Club Introduced in April 2009, it offers an equity-based luxury travel program.
- Marriott ExecuStay (45 major markets) "Furnished corporate housing for executives and travellers who need temporary accommodations for a month or longer."
- Marriott Executive Apartments (20 internationally) "offers travelers the perfect combination of upscale apartment-style living and premier hotel service."
- Grand Residences by Marriott "The ultimate alternative to condominiums and seasonal rentals" with locations in Lake Tahoe, London, Kauai Lagoons, and Panama City Beach, Fla.
- Marriott Rewards. Membership has grown from 12.7 million to 24.6 million in the years 2001-2008