

Marriott looking up in downturn

By [NORMAN DE BONO](#)

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Residence Inn by Marriott director of sales Christopher Bassoo and general manager Anna McNutt pose in one of the hotel's 116 rooms. (Derek Ruttan, the London Free Press)

A downtown London hotel is winning international honours and sales awards -- and the economic downturn is one reason why .

Business has boomed at the Residence Inn by Marriott, an extended-stay hotel on Colborne St., due in part to corporate executive teams descending on London to manage plant closings, layoffs and property sales.

"There was a lot of corporate travel and a lot of automotive," said Chris Bassoo, director of sales for Marriott. "A lot of companies out there are looking for businesses to buy -- we saw a lot of special project teams."

Occupancy at the hotel in 2008 jumped to more than 85%. The industry average in London is about 56%. This year, the Marriott's rate dropped to about 60%, but about 60 of its 116 rooms were out of commission for a massive renovation.

The hotel, and Bassoo specifically, have won two Marriott awards: Property sales leader of the year in the extended-stay category for Canada and all of North America. The hotel is managed by Atlific Hotels, which operates Marriott franchises. Anna McNutt, general manager of the London property, has been named GM of the year for Atlific for her work here.

"They gave it to us based on our numbers, revenue and occupancy. We had a very strong all-around year," said Bassoo. "We did really well."

But more than just the downturn fuelled the growth, said McNutt. The Marriott has built a diverse base that includes insurance clients, health-care related stays, family reunions and sports tournaments, to name a few, she said.

"We have a niche here offering all the comforts of home -- a bedroom, living room -- and that is why we appeal to a wider audience," McNutt said.

The southern end of the city has two other extended stay hotels -- they feature small kitchens, meals and laundry service to name a few amenities -- but likely only the Marriott that has profited from the downturn, thanks to its location, said Karie Shackleton, regional director of sales of the Staybridge Suites off Exeter and Wellington roads.

"Corporate travellers want to stay downtown. They want to walk to restaurants and shopping, they do not have cars," she said.

"If we were located next to the Marriott, it would be game on. Having the right location is key."

McNutt is forecasting business growth in 2010 for the Marriott that will top 2008, she said.

As for hotel traffic in London, it has dropped about 2% this year over last, but occupancy rates have slipped more because more hotels are competing now, said Luc Van Den Heuvel, president of the London Hotel and Motel Association.

From January to November this year, there were 463,675 room nights in the city, a drop of about 20,000 over 2008, when there were 483,542 nights.

During the last two years there has been about a 50% increase in the number of hotel rooms opened in the city -- slicing the business pie that much smaller.

But Van Den Heuvel is bullish on 2010, saying forecasts for his hotel, the Travelodge, call for an increase of about 5% in sales.

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HONOURS LIST

Marriott honours awarded this year to the Residence Inn by Marriott in London:

Most Improved Growth Canada 2008

Most Improved Growth North America 2008

Highest Extended Stay Occupancy Canada 2008

Property Sales Leader of the Year Canada (Christopher Bassoo, director of sales) 2008

Property Sales Leader of the Year North America (Christopher Bassoo) 2008

Direct Sales Leader of the Year, Marriott International (Christopher Bassoo) 2008

Direct Sales Leader of the Year, Atlific Hotels (Christopher Bassoo) 2008

General Manager of the Year, Atlific Hotels (Anna McNutt) 2008

Nominee for the environmental leadership award for 2010, London Chamber of Commerce