

## **Key West's Casa Marina Resort returns to grandeur**

**By CAMMY CLARK**

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American tycoon and railroad magnate Henry Flagler never saw the completion of the Casa Marina, the grand hotel he planned on a palm tree-filled oceanfront property for affluent customers of his Overseas Railroad.

The hotel opened on New Year's Eve 1920, years after his death, with the grandeur he envisioned.

But over the decades, the Casa Marina Resort & Beach Club underwent several piecemeal renovations and the addition of two wings, in 1978 and 1984. Some of the renovations, such as the cheap black mirror film placed on the ballroom and lobby windows that kept out the southernmost city's light, probably would have had Flagler turning in his grave.

Those changes are now history. General manager Kevin Speidel said he thinks the elegant Flagler would be pleased with the newest renovation - a \$43 million overhaul that is set for completion this month.

"It's based on the original architecture and restoring the original grandeur of the property," Speidel said, "but with contemporary additions."

Flagler would recognize the arches, but not the plasma TV, mini refrigerator, espresso machine and iHome docking station for iPods and MP3 players that are standard in all 311 rooms and suites.

"From soup to nuts, every square inch of this place is brand new, even the back of the house," Speidel said.

The Casa Marina's sister property, the 150-room boutique Reach Resort, also has undergone a \$37 million renovation that is expected to be completed by January.

It also features a white sandy beach, although not as large as the Casa Marina's, and a refurbished swimming pool.

A few miles away, the 222-room Beachside Resort and Conference Center opened Oct. 19. The luxury facility includes a 6,000-square-foot Beachside Ballroom and Town-N-Tavern, two restaurants created by world-renowned chef Norman Van Aken.

Each guest room has marble floors, oversized balconies with waterfront views, gourmet kitchens with granite counter tops and stainless built-in appliances, washer and dryer and high-speed Internet access. Most third floor suites have a private sundeck.

Jodi Weinhofer, president of the Lodging Association of the Florida Keys and Key West, said the major renovations and the opening of the new luxury resort help bring in the coveted high-end tourist.

"There is a lot of discussion if this is good or bad for the island," she said. "But most everyone in the Keys has said they don't want more tourists - they want better tourists."

During the renovations and construction the past year, she said the island's two biggest ballrooms were not available, forcing some events to go elsewhere.

"We needed them back on line," she said.

Weinhofer said there is no better hotel property in Key West than the Casa Marina, with a large oceanfront unmatched on the 8-square-mile island.

"Nobody walked in the front doors of the Casa Marina and wasn't wowed by it, with the glass front looking out to the water," she said. "But the sad thing was when they went into the rooms. Let's face it, the old concrete block structures were hard to do anything with. The rooms didn't match the property."

Speidel said the rooms now do. Gone are ugly forest green carpet, replaced by either hardwood floors or tile from Italy. All the furniture was replaced. The beds have 340-thread count sheets. The color scheme is earth tones. Many of the balcony rails were solid, making it difficult to see the ocean while sitting. Now they are glass.

"It was not an easy renovation, prohibitive because it's an antique structure," Weinhofer said of the building, which is on the National Historic Register.

In the original section, no two of the 113 rooms are exactly the same, Speidel said. And under the ballroom and lobby floors, there's a 750-gallon, functioning cistern.

But Speidel said Blackstone Real Estate Advisors, under the umbrella company LXR Luxury Resorts, bought the place in 2005 and infused the capital necessary to return the place to its days of grandeur, when the likes of Gregory Peck, Rita Hayworth and Cary Grant stayed there.

With inspiration from old photographs that showed a small walkway from the main lobby leading to the Atlantic Ocean, longtime Key West architect Jose Gonzalez designed a "Water Walk" with a modern update of cascading pools beside it.

Now there are symmetrical swimming pools on each side of the walkway, with the whole property's landscape redone to add to the tropical feel, while not blocking spectacular views of the ocean from the rooms.

#### IF YOU GO:

-Casa Marina: 1500 Reynolds St.; 866-397-6342; [www.casamarinaresort.com](http://www.casamarinaresort.com). Double rooms, \$189-\$389.

-Reach Resort: 1435 Simonton St.; 866-397-6427; [www.reachresort.com](http://www.reachresort.com). Rooms, \$189-\$329.

-Beachside Resort: 3841 N. Roosevelt Blvd.; 305-296-8100; [www.beachsidekeywest.com](http://www.beachsidekeywest.com). Rooms from \$199.