

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Posted on Sun, Jan. 13, 2008

Old grandeur meets new comforts in Key West

By Cammy Clark

Miami Herald



The pool's refurbished, but distinctive arches remain at Casa Marina Resort & Beach Club, which just underwent a \$43 million renovation.

KEY WEST, Fla. - 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 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 to keep out the southernmost city's light, probably would have had Flagler turning in his grave.

Those changes are now history. General manager Kevin Speidel says he thinks the elegant Flagler would be pleased with the newest renovation - a \$43 million overhaul completed last month.

"It's based on the original architecture and restoring the original grandeur of the property," Speidel says, "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 the 311 rooms and suites.

"Every square inch of this place is brand new, even the back of the house," Speidel says.

The Casa Marina's sister property, the 150-room boutique Reach Resort, has undergone a \$37 million renovation and is scheduled to open by the end of the month. It also features a white sandy beach, although not as large as Casa Marina's, and a refurbished swimming pool.

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

Each guest room has marble floors, an oversized balcony with waterfront view, a gourmet kitchen with granite countertop and stainless appliances, washer and dryer, and high-speed Internet access. Most third-floor suites have a private sundeck.

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

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

Luxury in Key West

Casa Marina Resort & Beach Club

1500 Reynolds St.

1-866-397-6342 www.casamarinaresort.com

Double rooms: \$189-\$389.

Reach Resort

1435 Simonton St.

1-866-397-6427

www.reachresort.com

Rooms: \$189-\$329.

Beachside Resort

3841 N. Roosevelt Blvd. 305-296-8100

www.beachsidekeywest.com

Rooms from \$199.