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Relaxed Attitude: Properties such as Viceroy Mayakoba (above), Viceroy Palm Springs (center) and Solage Calistoga (right) are redefining the resort experience.

Laid-Back Luxury

New resort brands combine casual style with top amenities

by MARIA LENHART

A NEW WAVE OF RESORT HOTEL BRANDS, SHOWING UP EVERYWHERE FROM Napa Valley to Miami, is putting a new twist on the traditional resort experience. In their design and services these properties are addressing what some hoteliers see as a profound shift in the preferences and lifestyles of both business and leisure resort guests.

Often less than 200 or even 100 rooms in size, many of these new resorts seem to be more influenced by urban boutique hotels than by

the traditional "destination resorts" of several hundred rooms or more. At the same time, however, the level of services and amenities may rival or even surpass those at more established resorts.

"The emphasis is not on creating a big resort, but in creating an experience," says hotel industry consultant Heather Small, an analyst with Lodging Econometrics in Portsmouth, N.H. "The new brands are targeting a growing segment of affluent business and leisure travelers who want an updated luxury model."

Small notes that the new resorts are often less formal in style than their predecessors, yet do not skimp when it comes to drawing on the resources of celebrity chefs, interior decorators and golf course designers. And while the rooms may be few in number, the square footage tends to be of suite or villa proportions and appointed with every comfort imaginable.

"The business travelers of today may be more casual in dress, but they still want all the bells and whistles," she says. "And they are very sophisticated. They know who all the big names are."

Capella Hotels and Resorts

Kit Pappas, vice president of sales for Capella Hotels and Resorts, a new brand headed by former Ritz-Carlton

president Horst Schultze, has a similar observation.

"People are dressing more casually, but at the same time they are more demanding and well-traveled than ever," he says. "The expectations in terms of service have never been higher."

Capella, which will have 10 hotels opened by the end of 2008, has resort projects under way that include the 100-room Capella Telluride, opening late this year in Telluride, Colo. Under development in Mexico and scheduled to open later this year are Capella Bahia Marona, an 82-unit, all-suite property in the Riviera Maya, and the 66-room Capella Pedregal in Cabo San Lucas.

According to Pappas, the resorts will cater to small, upscale meeting and incentive groups. Meeting spaces range from two boardrooms in Cabo San Lucas to a 3,500-square-foot ballroom in Telluride. Buyouts of the properties will be available at off-peak times of year.

Whether guests are attending a meeting or on vacation, they will find an extraordinary level of personal service at Capella resorts, according to Pappas.

"Our research has told us that the luxury guest wants to be treated as an individual, which is one reason why our hotels are 100 rooms or less," he says. "Our training puts a lot of em-

phasis on the individual. Guests are contacted prior to their stay about what they want in their rooms, what kind of activities they want."

At the same time, Capella is placing a lot of emphasis on providing a sense of place, Pappas says.

"There's an emphasis on experiencing the local culture and on local activities, whether sleigh rides or sport fishing," he says. "Fifteen or 20 years ago all you needed was a pool and a golf course to provide the resort experience. Now guests expect a tie-in with the locale."

Viceroy Hotels & Resorts

The Kor Hotel Group's 5-year-old Viceroy Hotels & Resorts brand, which already has resort hotels in two California locations, Palm Springs and Santa Monica, currently has resorts under way in Miami, Snowmass, Colo., on both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Mexico, and in Anguilla in the British West Indies. Most are in the 150-250 room range and include spas, multiple food and beverage outlets, kid's clubs, and indoor and outdoor meeting space.

"We want to be in all the top U.S. feeder markets and top resort destinations," says Tom Santora, vice president of sales and marketing for Viceroy. "We're competing with top-

of-the-line companies such as Mandarin Oriental, and Four Seasons."

What sets Viceroy apart from many older resort brands is that each property features a locally-inspired design that is unique to the hotel, according to Santora. The 164-room Viceroy Mayakoba, opening in Mexico's Riviera Maya in spring 2009, will feature lagoon—front villas with interiors by celebrity designer Kelly Wearstler, while the 236-room Viceroy Snowmass, opening in late 2009, will feature a modern design incorporating stone, wood and glass elements by Jean-Michel Gathy.

"Our niche is that we are strong on both design and service levels," Santora says. "Some luxury resorts have great service, but the design is not out of the ordinary. Each of our designs provides an element of surprise and very much reflects the destination."

Santora adds that Viceroy's design concept extends to function areas, with the idea of creating spaces that are conducive to conversation and provide a degree of inspiration.

"For instance, at Viceroy Santa Monica we have an area used for special events with poolside cabanas and flat-screen TVs," he says. "We're very popular with advertising and public relations firms, companies involved in car design—groups who are sensitive to design and do not want a formula brand resort."

Solage Hotels & Resorts

A new brand created by Auberge Resorts, Solage Hotels & Resorts, like its parent company, is targeting a high-end market, but offers a more casual atmosphere and less expensive rates. The first resort, Solage Calistoga, opened in Napa Valley last summer, with design elements and amenities reflecting the California Wine County lifestyle.

The 89-room resort's main dining area is Solbar, a bar and casual restaurant opening onto large outdoor terraces, fire pits, bocce courts, and views of the Palisades Mountains. Function areas include an 11,500-square-foot event lawn, a pool area with cabanas

and a barn-like meetings complex that accommodates up to 300 attendees and has large sliding glass doors on three sides.

The resort's Spa Solange pays homage to Calistoga's origins as a hot springs destination with geothermal pools and a mud bar. Complimentary "cruiser" bikes are on hand for guests to cycle through the 25-acre property or into the town of Calistoga.

According to Mark Harmon, CEO of Auberge Resorts, the company plans to open additional Solage Resorts in mountain and beach locations across the U.S. and Mexico, with a particular focus on California and other Western states.

"We envision a collection of hotels that are fresh, inclusive and distinctive to their settings," he says. "We designed Solage to address what many have seen as a new generation of resort guests who are looking for a comfortable and active place that invigorates, refreshes and relaxes."

Nickelodeon Resorts by Marriott

Although its properties will be similar in size to most traditional resorts, the new Nickelodeon Resorts by Marriott brand is also addressing a demographical change among resort guests: the trend for resort guests to combine a business trip or meeting with a family vacation.

"As younger Boomers and Gen Xers enter prime child-rearing years, their clear preference for seamlessly mixing business with leisure and family fun will mesh perfectly with the Nickelodeon Resorts by Marriott concept," said Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott International, in a statement announcing the new brand earlier this year.

A joint venture between Marriott, Nickelodeon and Miller Global Properties, plans are calling for 20 potential hotels to be developed in major resort destinations around the world. The first resort will be a 650-room property in San Diego that is scheduled to open in 2010.

Signature components of the resorts will be indoor or outdoor water parks and live entertainment productions featuring popular Nickelodeon characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants. On average, the resorts will offer 30,000 square feet of meeting space. ☀