

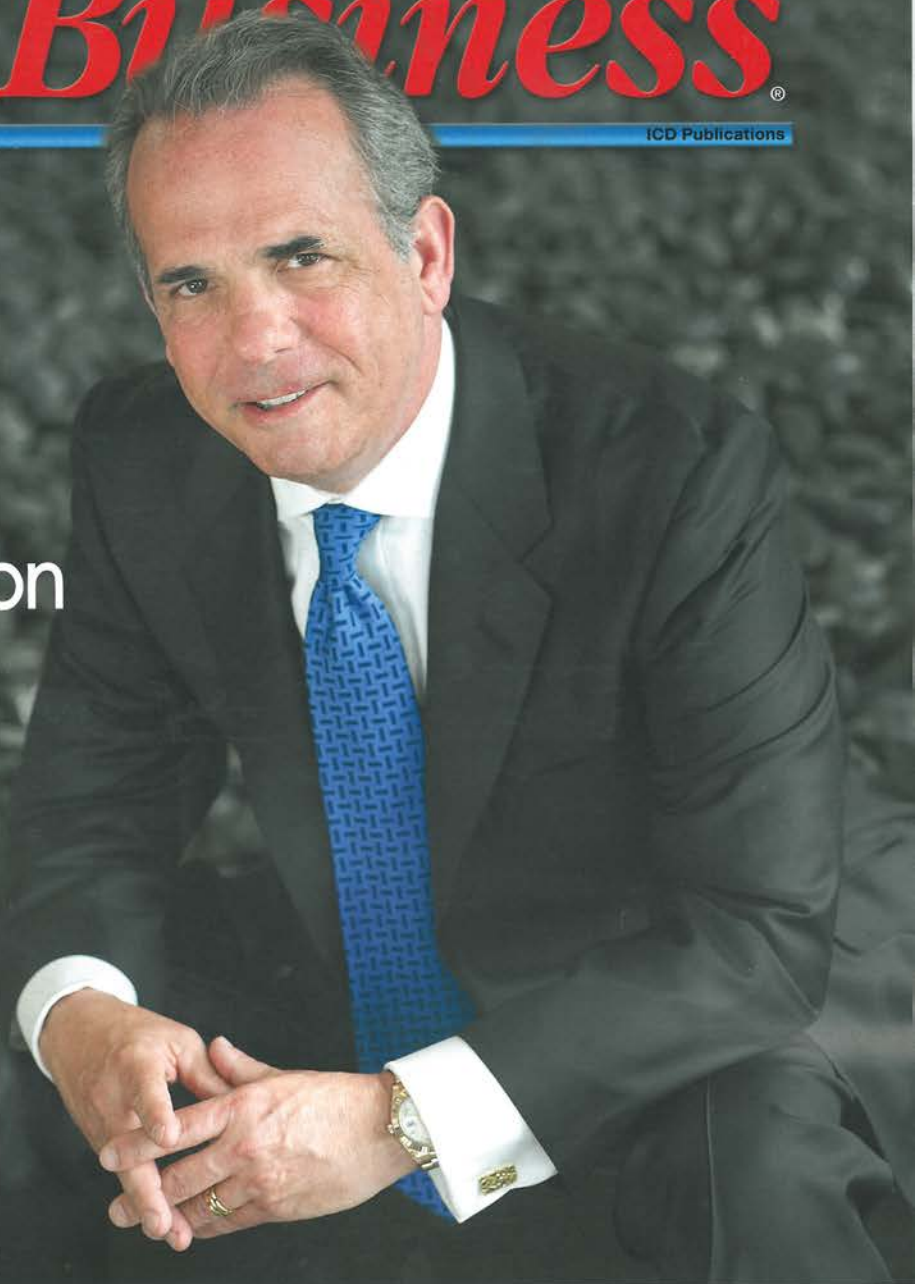
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HOTEL BUSINESS
ON THE
SCENE

With more than 2,000 rooms, the Orlando World Center Marriott is the brand's largest property in the world.

New water features at the Marriott include the 90-ft. Icon Speed Slide Tower and two winding slides.



Major reno makes Orlando World Center Marriott its own destination

BY STEFANI C. O'CONNOR

ORLANDO, FL—It's one thing to be noodling around the idea that maybe your property could do with a refresh or a serious tweak to some of the amenities you offer, but when the man whose name is on your hotel thinks you can capture more business by "adding a few things," it really is best to listen.

Now, bigger, better, best could ostensibly be considered the rallying cry for Marriott's Orlando World Center. With more than 2,000 rooms, the hotel is the largest Marriott in the world, a laurel it has worn for a decade since adding some 500 rooms. But the last 10 years also have seen the continued burgeoning of hotels and attractions in this area. So when lodging icon J.W. "Bill" Marriott Jr. made one of his customary visits to the 27-year-old property, his conversation standing on a balcony with GM Doug Ridge ran along the lines of: "What do we need to do to have a distinguishable difference; everybody's got something. When's the last time we did anything with the pool? Why don't we make that lagoon a lazy river? Maybe we need to build a bigger pool bar." The answers to that casual conversation between the lodging legend and the veteran GM became for owner Host Hotels and Resorts a multimillion-dollar, multi-year renovation that—completed this year—has made the hotel what its executives like to call "its own destination."

"Obviously, we have to stay current with our product and to be competitive in this market and offer really what our customers are looking for, so we looked at all the angles," said Gary Dybul, the property's director of sales and marketing.

Ridge and his team worked with the hotel's asset manager, members of Host's and Marriott's architecture and design departments, as well as TVS Design and The John Hardy Group, both out of Atlanta, to bring the renovation to fruition.

"We started out with the renovation of all of our 110 suites, most of which are on the pool side of the hotel, in all the towers," said Dybul, noting there are nine different suite offerings, ranging from the 477-sq-ft Promenade Suites to the sprawling, 4,000-sq-ft International Suite that provides sweeping views of the area.

In addition, 504 guestrooms and 10 suites in the property's North Tower were completely renovated. In the same location 13 meeting rooms were enhanced with new carpeting, air walls and electronic door cards.

"It has a hotel within a hotel feel, so a smaller group can really have more of an isolated feel in that space and not feel like they're competing for meeting space with some of our larger groups," said Dybul.

"With 2,009 rooms, we did it in phases so there was no business interruption. We did it during our slow period and guests didn't even know we were renovating," said Ridge, noting anywhere from three to six floors at a time were taken out of inventory.

Also given a new design was the hotel's "Hall of Cities," 14 meeting rooms that lead to the Orlando World Center Marriott's 230,000-sq-ft. ballroom.



Doug Ridge (left) and Gary Dybul, Orlando World Center Marriott

Part of the upgrade to the meeting space was a tripling of the bandwidth into the hotel to help meet advanced technology needs. "Technology changes every single day and the needs of meetings as well as individuals is they want to be connected all the time. We also added points of access and we do have complimentary wireless Internet access out at the pool and throughout all of our public space. (The hotel charges for in-room access.) We know it's important to our guests to have that connectivity," said Dybul.

Aqua, russet and neutral tones play out over much of the refreshed design and Dybul noted, "We really tried to harmoniously join the meeting space and guestrooms and suites to have a similar look and feel, to connect the hotel a little bit more than it was."

Key among what the property offered over the years has been its water features, and Marriott wanted to take that up a notch—a big notch—to help compete against the area's plethora of theme parks, hoping expanded facilities would keep guests attention at the resort for a greater portion of their stay. The existing pool was closed from August to December 2012 as the area was

renovated. The physical structure remained but the surrounding area was changed out. "The [area] was scraped, rebuilt featuring brick pavers and landscaping to really give it an elevated look and feel and some good functionality," said Dybul.

Closing down a pool while there's still summer vacations to be had may seem counterproductive, but Dybul stressed it was important to get the area revamped prior to the hotel's peak season, which runs January through March. "We had to get it done prior to first-quarter 2013...you never want to affect any guests, but we really wanted to try and make sure we completed it before we went into the new year," he said, noting a smaller, outdoor pool was still available on the hotel's West Terrace.

Dybul acknowledged the shut down "definitely had a negative effect on us" in terms of occupancy in the back half of 2012. He said guests and groups coming to the hotel were alerted about the renovations, and the hotel even built a bar and restaurant at the secondary pool to meet guest demands.

"It was a difficult period, for sure," said Dybul. He said the property lost approximately 5,000 to 6,000 rooms of confirmed group business. He added concessions were offered to some groups and the hotel was able to book business with groups not concerned with being at the pool. "Even to our transient guests we were offering resort credits," he said.

"We did a bounce-back offer, a very discounted rate so they could come back after the pool was completed so they could enjoy everything that we did," added Ridge. "We had a lot of guests take us up on that, especially this summer."

In redefining the pool area, both adults and children were taken into consideration.

Among the changes: A poolside bar featuring casual dining and an expanded pool deck and lawn for poolside events, particularly for groups, or activities, such as yoga, all set within landscaping reminiscent of a tropical location.

"The pool's bar and grill had been located on an upper deck and we wanted to bring it down. It had been much smaller in capacity and now has a 180-seat capacity with an amphitheater-style look. We've got some soft seating areas with fire pits, we've got hard seating up on the deck, communal tables. So we were really able to accommodate what our guests are looking for: that great poolside experience," said Dybul.

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Orlando World Center Marriott

Shifting the bar and grill poolside opened the upper deck for kids' activities, such as supervised face painting, Lego building and scavenger hunts. In addition, the hotel added a Splash Zone with kids' zero-entry pool, complete with a water playground that incorporates bubbles, fountains, water cannons, lily pads, spray jets, water mushrooms and a small water slide.

It's the "Big Slide," however, that's been grabbing a lot of attention. Looking like it could be found in a water park, the Marriott's Icon slide tower offers three features: a 90-ft.-high speed water slide and two, 200-ft. winding water slides, one open, the other enclosed.

"What we've done is create a destination within ourselves," said Dybul. "Before, if you were a family or leisure guest, you might be going to the [theme] parks for a couple of days, kind of resting your head here and only spending a little bit of time. Now, we've really created a destination experience that allows you to come for us, so maybe you spend one day at a theme park and spend three days with us. The slide tower and

creating the environment to be the destination was the driver behind it. Mr. Marriott had a big influence on that."

Added Ridge: "The biggest reaction I hear when I interact with guests in the lobby is that the kids don't want to go to the theme parks. They came all the way down here and the kids want to stay at the pool."

The hotel is in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and has lifts not only in its main pools but also in its hot tubs, the spa pool and in the children's Splash Zone.

As might be expected, the Orlando World Center Marriott offers a variety of food and beverage options. There are 10 restaurants and lounges, including its own food court for grab-and-go options.

New as part of the recent renovation are Siro, described as an "urban" Italian restaurant and a revamped Starbucks, both located in the hotel's lobby.

"Starbucks was more of a counter

service before and we really expanded it to make it have more of a neighborhood-style feel: there's soft and hard seating, there's wireless service—people are using it as they would a neighborhood Starbucks; really networking," said Dybul.

He said Siro's replaced a more-formal dining experience, Tuscany.



The new Falls Pool Bar and Grill gives adults some options for casual dining.

"What we found and what you see in food trends is people really want that amazing culinary experience, but in a more casual setting."

Siro's offers numerous communal tables for its many tapas-style offerings

and guests can go in for a full dinner or just some flatbreads and wine. Having the new restaurant in place "opened up the lobby quite a bit, again, encouraging networking," said Dybul.

Since the completion of the renovations is recent, the hotel is still collecting data to track impact; however, at press time the DoS/M said the Marriott's

group pace looks "very, very strong" for 2014, while "our leisure pace numbers are showing positive trends year-over-year and have for the past 30 days. Up until that, we weren't really seeing positive trends. Since we've completed this 'full experience,' our pace throughout the rest of the year has jumped dramatically. Our anticipation is we will certainly grow our occupancy from what we've been over the past year-and-a-half.

Orlando continues to have strong leisure demand—staying stable—and with higher occupancies we can start driving ADR a little bit more and we should see higher occupancy and higher ADR as we move forward."