

Builders checking into the boutiques

Small is beautiful, and elegant, for the newest lodging trend

By KRISTEN D'ANDREA

Check in to the Viana Hotel & Spa and you may initially think you've arrived for an appointment at a bank. Not to meet with a teller, however, but the bank president.

Three sit-down desks replace a traditional hotel check-in counter in the spacious lobby. The concierge, seated at eye level, rises to greet you and pulls out your chair before offering you a warm towel and some lemonade. Once your paperless check-in process is complete, a hotel employee escorts you through the hotel, which combines feng shui principles with environmentally-sustainable designs, to your room.

No, you're not going luxe in lower Manhattan or slipping into a boutique hotel in the Knightsbridge section of London. Try Westbury.

Intended "to create phenomenal client satisfaction," according to co-owner Alan Mindel, the Viana is one of the newest boutique hotels to open on the Island, a hot building trend striving to appeal to unique and specific desires and expectations of its guests.

The hotel incorporates the five elements of feng shui — fire, water, wood, metal and earth — with green building, solar energy, advanced water conservation fixtures, such as dual-flush toilets, and LED lighting. If you're getting the picture this is not your grandmother's Long Island hotel/motel, you're right. The Viana features an adult game room, complete with an Xbox, satellite television, a DVD player and board games. There's a full-service restaurant fusing traditional Italian cuisine

with an Asian touch using electronic menus plus six spa treatment rooms with names such as Harmony, Zen and Unity. The Viana is appealing to corporate and leisure travelers who like to work, play and follow trends hard.

While guests will pay for the comfort and serenity that the Viana is selling, Mindel, who is also owner of the Inn at Great Neck and Four Points by Sheraton in Plainview, insists his property is still a travel bargain at \$185 for a standard room.

"We're right in there with your big box competitors," he said, noting guests will pay more to stay at the Viana than the Hampton Inn up the road, but less than at the Fox Hollow.

Recent growth in lodging has moved in the direction of smaller, upscale boutique hotels, rather than large chains, primarily due to costs, according to Moke McGowan, president of the Long Island Convention & Visitors Bureau.

During the last two years, 1,100 rooms have been added to Long Island's inventory, with 110 more to come with the opening of the Hyatt Place in Riverhead, currently under construction. Many of these properties were already in development prior to the bottom of the market falling out in 2008. While the Island had been experiencing demand rise by five to six percent, the only way hotels are filling rooms now is by lowering rates, McGowan said.



See BOUTIQUES, 37A

Luxury beckons at The Viana Hotel & Spa.

Boutiques: Local flavor

From 31A

THE REVITALIZATION OF DOWNTOWNS IS MAKING WAY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL UPSCALE BOUTIQUE HOTELS

"It's a very difficult time to be trying to find heads for the beds," he added.

Do boutique hotels have a leg up on the competition? "These properties focus on niche audiences," McGowan said. "How effective they are in reaching these audiences may determine how effective they are in getting through this economy."

Mike Johnston, founder of LIHT Hospitality, a hotel management company in Centerport, and former head of the Long Island Hotel and Lodging Association, said success all comes down to location. But it helps to have a big backer behind you as well.

Riverhead's Hotel Indigo, the newest luxury brand of InterContinental Hotels Group, is benefiting from support from one of the largest global hotel franchises. Rob Salvitico, Indigo's owner and vice president of operations, said it was a bold venture to knock down and revitalize a 40-year-old Holiday Inn on the East End of Long Island. "But Riverhead is expanding rapidly," he said, noting Indigo's central location just 20 minutes from both the North and South Forks and close proximity to the Long Island Expressway.

The new custom-designed property, which opened last August, offers its guests a "60s-Palms Spring-retro feel."

"The idea was to create a destination-type hotel while meeting the needs of Long Island's business travelers," Salvitico said. "We think people are looking for a little local flavor, not just another bed to sleep in."

While brand affiliation is helping the Indigo, more boutique hotels, such as the Allegrria in Long Beach, which Johnston's company manages, and the Soho Grand Hotel in New York City, are opening independently across the nation. And the lack of corporate support is not necessarily a detriment to a property's success, he said, noting there are many avenues for marketing hotels today.

Up and down the East Coast, Johnston said, the revitalization of downtowns is making way for the development of small, upscale boutique hotels. "As long as it

doesn't get oversaturated, I think there will be a market for them," Johnston said. "There's always a place for uniqueness, and for upscale, eclectic clientele."

Demand for Long Island's luxury properties was up 11.8 percent in 2010, McGowan said. Accordingly, occupancy at luxury hotels was up 9 percent, although rates were down 4.5 percent.

"Everybody's trying to find equilibrium and balance which gets more difficult as you add more rooms," he said.

Johnston agreed, adding, "We're not overbuilt on Long Island yet and I really hope it won't get there."