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Featured Spotlights

Hotel Shangri-La: Heaven on Earth

Written by Amanda Gaines
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Since its grand opening in 1939, Hotel Shangri-La has been exactly what its Santa Monica community has needed. It began as an elegant apartment hotel and in the 1940s became a Navy barracks for the soldiers of World War II. Throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, when there were few hotels in the sleepy town west of Los Angeles, Hotel Shangri-La served as a secluded, quiet, and quaint hideaway for famous names such as Tom Cruise and then Governor Bill Clinton.



Tehmina Adaya, President and CEO

But in the last 20 years or so, Santa Monica has changed, and the small coastal city experienced a burgeoning of modern hotels. At the same time, Hotel Shangri-La began to show its age. And as the Art Deco architectural gem and iconic landmark approached its 70th birthday, Tehmina Adaya, the hotel's president and CEO, decided it was time to give something back to the hotel that's given so much to so many.

"When a building gives back so much to the community over the years and fulfills the needs of that developing community, you have to take the time to give back to the building," she said. "We're going beyond giving the hotel a facelift; we're bringing it up to speed with what Santa Monica needs today."

Translating a vision

According to Adaya, what Santa Monica needed was more hotel rooms with modern amenities. As a result, when Hotel Shangri-La reopened in October 2008, it did so with 71 rooms and suites—an increase of 17 rooms. But the expansion wasn't as simple as it sounds.

One of Adaya's concerns when renovating Hotel Shangri-La was bringing it up to speed with modern amenities without losing its soul. One of the ways in which she was able to tread that fine line, keeping the integrity of the building, the architecture, and the design aesthetic was by putting a new spin on the Streamline Moderne style the hotel is well known for illustrating.

"Most of our furniture is inspired by that period, but rather than having blonde wood, which was popular back then and more minimalist, it's a richer, darker walnut," Adaya said.

Although the building will remain black and white, as mandated by the local historical society, the rooms will add a splash of color. The hardwood floors of each room are dark, almost black with a touch of blue. The furniture is primarily soft, warm grays, and the hotel's accent color is a vibrant red.

While the décor of the hotel capably blends a bit of the historic with a bit of the modern, the amenities of Hotel Shangri-La are 100% of the 21st century. All rooms will have high-speed Internet, top-quality sound systems, and room service—all new features. All told, with the help of Marc Smith, owner of Los Angeles-based Edison Downtown and Three Clubs, Adaya translated her vision to provide to the city of Santa Monica what it needs today, bringing the hotel up to speed with modern amenities without losing its original essence.

"There have to be modern touches, but we didn't want another modern ubiquitous hotel housed in a beautiful new building," she said. "Marc was brought in to put my vision into reality, and he's translated my vision exactly the way I needed it to be translated."

Reconciling dichotomies

Adaya's ability to reconcile the dichotomy between wanting to keep the history of Hotel Shangri-La alive while bringing it into the 21st century is also reflected in the environment she created with the renovations. When choosing a vacation destination, we typically have to choose between a party hotel or a spa hotel: a place where we can stay secluded in our rooms or a place where we can mingle with the rest of the guests or the friends we traveled with.

Adaya wants to know why we have to choose. Her vision is for Shangri-La to reconcile these issues, and she added services to the hotel that made that vision a reality.

The renovations maintained the lush courtyard that previous guests loved, but Hotel Shangri-La will also house a rooftop bar and lounge, courtyard pool, gym, and a dining area that appeals to both couples looking for a romantic dinner for two or groups of friends looking for a social dining experience.

"It's great for people to have romantic dinners, but the real focus of the dining area is social dining," said Adaya. "You can go with a group of friends or four people, and you can share dishes, kind of like family style."

In addition, Santa Monica's bi-weekly farmer's market is close to the hotel, so the chef will integrate fresh—and, where possible, organic—food into the menu while keeping a low carbon footprint by not having to fly in fresh ingredients from around the world.

"We want people to laugh, have a good time, drink—a lot of conviviality," Adaya said. "Just good times; that's what the mandate is for the restaurant, and that's the mandate for the newly improved Hotel Shangri-La."



This California-based boutique hotel blends the sensibilities of yesteryear while meeting the modern demands of the 21st century.

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