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Getaway: Down-home comfort in Dallas

Plenty to do in the heart of Texas' north star

by *Cheré Coen*

For one of the largest cities in America, downtown Dallas grows a bit quiet on the weekends. Too much solitude for a city might worry the city's development executives, who are working toward jump-starting the heart of Dallas, but for the traveler, particularly a weekend getaway visitor, the peace is a welcome attribute.

Downtown is home to fabulous museums and performance spaces of the arts district, not to mention the brand spanning new AT&T Performing Arts Center. There's also the flagship Neiman Marcus department store, numerous restaurants to choose from and the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza that offers a historical timeline to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

At the heart of downtown is the newly renovated Sheraton Dallas Hotel, which just completed its \$90 million renovation of the hotel and conference center and is within walking distance of most downtown attractions, so guests can park the car and forgo Dallas traffic. Peace and comfort and a feeling of home were the driving forces of this transformation, said Ray Hammer, general manager, along with state-of-the-art technology. The hotel is bathed in calming earth tones, with comfy chairs and sofas everywhere, restaurants offering comfort foods such as mac and cheese and meatloaf and a 32-seat docking station where guests can enjoy free Wi-Fi on PCs or dock their own laptops.

At the entrance, since this is Texas, a sign also lets visitors know it's the largest hotel in the Lone Stone State. It might be because Hammer is from Boston, but he's not bragging about that statistic.

"What I want that sign to say is, 'Welcome to the warmest hotel in Texas'," Hammer said.

Warm includes a fire pit on the hotel's patio, where guests can enjoy drinks or coffee and s'mores, that arrive toasted and wrapped in aluminum foil, or cups of toasted almonds, all part of the hotel's focus on down-home comfort.

"We try to keep it simple and what people miss when they're not at home," Hammer explained.

Restaurants include the Kitchen Table with its comfort foods as well as more sophisticated fare, Peet's Coffee, Chill Yogurt and the \$3.5 million Draft Sports Bar, a fun 4,500-square-foot space with pool tables, darts, karaoke booths and Wii games on large-screen TVs.

The fitness center consists of 4,000 square feet of high-class equipment, fronting the outdoor pool and cabana area overlooking the Dallas skyline.

The 1,840 guest rooms, 222 suites and 24 presidential suites have all been refurbished as well, and

include plush mattresses and linens, flat-panel LCD high definition TVs and work areas with high-speed internet access. Children and pets are welcome, the latter receiving dog bowls and beds upon request.

The renovation included some major green initiatives, Hammer said, including the installation of a \$1.5 million laundry system that reduces water consumption by two-thirds. Rooms contain recycling bins and infrared detection systems that adjust temperature. Guests can also place a card outside their door foregoing housekeeping services to save energy and receive a \$5 gift card on any of the hotel's dining establishments.

And if the renovation's not reason enough to visit, the hotel was voted No. 1 in the *Dallas Business Journal's* Best Places to Work.

Specials are available, including group rates, and can be accessed via the Web site. And in the not-too-distant future, the light rail will provide service from the airport to downtown.
