

TRAVELAGE WEST

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

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restorative effects

By Cheré Coen

Ask any New Orleans resident and they will tell you stories about visiting The Roosevelt Hotel on Canal Street, from hearing Tony Bennett in the Blue Room to enjoying late-night cocktails at The Sazerac Bar.

For Christmas, residents would stroll through the block-long lobby, festively decorated with tiny lights, known during the holidays as the "Angel Hair Lobby," or take their children to Teddy Bear Tea with Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Web Exclusive

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A rendering of the new Roosevelt entrance

Before the 20th century, the hotel was actually called "The Grunewald" but was renamed in honor of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1923. Fairmont Hotels & Resorts bought the property in 1965 and changed the name, but locals always referred to the city landmark as "The Roosevelt."

Now, after a \$145 million renovation, the historic hotel will reopen this summer as The Roosevelt New Orleans, owned by locally based Dimensions Development group and managed by the Waldorf Astoria Collection, the luxury brand of Hilton Hotels

Corporation.

However, the restoration and renovation of this historic hotel didn't come without its kinks. The Roosevelt, like many other New Orleans hotels, was boarded up for protection against Hurricane Katrina in 2005. While the building itself received little more than a few broken windows, it sat vacant for many months without electricity, according to Jim Lestelle, senior consultant for The Ehrhardt Group, who is handling the hotel's public relations and communications.

The new owners not only vowed to restore and upgrade the famous hotel, but also to bring the historic aspects of the property back to its former glory. Relics of the hotel's past will be on display, including a mosaic floor — which was discovered underneath the carpet of the main lobby — and a large, etched letter "R" found in the stone flooring of The Sazerac Bar.

Other renovations, such as cleaning some 16,000 crystal chandelier strands, were painstakingly made. The process of ridding the crystals of caked-on nicotine and other dirt took almost a year.

"We think no major changes had been done to the hotel in nearly 50 years," Lestelle said.

The depression-era murals by Paul Ninas in The Sazerac Bar, appraised before Katrina at \$2 million, were protected during the storm and will be displayed for all to admire. The lounge,

which served two New Orleans native cocktails for years — the Sazerac and Ramos Gin Fizz — was one of the hottest places to be seen in the city.

The Blue Room, where performers from Louis Armstrong to Sonny and Cher once greeted audiences, will be available for live entertainment and its famous Sunday brunch.

"It will be a prime destination — as it always has been — for weddings and receptions," Lestelle said.

Because travelers expect more now than they did in the time of Louisiana Gov. Huey Long, who frequented The Roosevelt, the number of rooms has been decreased (from a little more than 700 to around 500) to create larger, more contemporary units. Guestrooms have also been upgraded to include high-speed Internet access, hypo-allergenic pillows, high thread-count linens and bathrooms that feature flat-screen televisions.

Of the hotel's 500 rooms, 123 are suites, seven of which are the more luxurious, butler suites. Featuring 1,400 to 2,000 square feet, the butler suites will offer private entrances, bay windows overlooking the historic Orpheum Theater and, as the name implies, butler service.

"Celebrities are really going to find these particular suites appealing because of the privacy," Lestelle said.

The Roosevelt will also unveil the fifth restaurant by renowned chef John Best. Domenica restaurant will serve rustic Italian fare, headed by co-owner and executive chef Alon Shaya, in an open-dining space that seats about 120.

In addition, the hotel will offer 60,000 square feet of meeting space, which includes three restored ballrooms and 23 meeting rooms.

The 12,500-square-foot Guerlain Spa will feature massage, body treatments, hydrotherapy facilities, Vichy showers, a full-service salon and a retail space. The Waldorf Imperiale — a special two-hour "cocooning experience" — will be the hotel's signature treatment. The treatment will include a body massage and facial featuring Guerlain's skincare products.

The spa is expected to open in the late summer and the hotel in early June. And, according to Lestelle, reservations are currently looking strong for the first few months, when special summer packages will be offered as well.

www.therooseveltneworleans.com