

Seattle Post-Intelligencer



The main lobby of the new Four Seasons Hotel and Private Residences is a starting point to water views, an eight-room spa and a pool on a fourth-floor terrace. (Dan DeLong / P-I)

In the lap of luxury at the Four Seasons

Hotelier bets on high-end guests and residents even in hard times

Monday, October 27, 2008

Last updated 12:34 a.m. PT

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After a five-year absence, the Four Seasons name is returning to Seattle, and the company is confident it can draw customers to premium lodgings even in straitened times.

The Four Seasons Hotel and Private Residences Seattle, set to open Nov. 3 at 99 Union St., is the first to bear that brand here since the building at 411 University St. changed its name to the Fairmont Olympic Hotel in the summer of 2003.

The 147-room hotel, in a sleek new 21-story building on the site of a former parking garage, will emphasize personal service and deluxe accommodations for very high-end business and leisure travelers.

Rooms will sell for between \$365 and \$535 a night, with the 13 suites selling for between \$695 and \$5,000. The hotel will employ 250 people when fully staffed.

"The ownership is thrilled that it's the right size: not a convention hotel going after the megameetings but tailored for small meetings," said John Oppenheimer, the head of the group that owns the hotel, in an interview last week. "In this economy, that's a huge plus."



Oppenheimer

The hotel occupies floors three through 10 of the 310,000-square-foot, \$150 million building. The smallest room is 450 square feet, in contrast to the average Seattle hotel room's 350 square feet, spokespeople said.

Another 10,000 feet are devoted to six meeting rooms and a water-facing, 200-seat ballroom with two-story, floor-to-ceiling windows.

There's an eight-room spa, including a couples' suite with a fireplace and water views; a fitness center; and a fourth-floor terrace with a pool and an open fireplace.

The Seattle office of architects NBBJ designed the building. The lobby's decor, by San Francisco's BraytonHughes Design Studios, is crisply contemporary but warm in feeling, done in shades of blue, tan and gray with bright accent rugs. Horizontally oriented polished or matte-finished limestone lines the walls. The furnishings are cream and earthy deep reds, golds and browns. A long, elegantly simple corner fireplace burns near the front desk.

Several of the paintings in the lobby and restaurant are original works on loan from local private collections. The guest rooms feature 16 reproduced works from the Seattle Art Museum, which is directly across the street.

The restaurant, called ART, stresses Northwest cuisine and offers 160 wines by the glass, mostly from the Northwest. Executive chef Kerry Sear, who has held that position at Four Seasons hotels in Seattle, Toronto and Vancouver, B.C., for the last 10 years has run his own restaurant, Cascadia, in Belltown.

Fran's Chocolates of Seattle will house its flagship store in the smaller of the two street-level retail spaces. The other space hasn't been leased.

Floors 11 through 21 contain 36 private residences, including two penthouses.

So far, 25 residences have sold, including both penthouses, fetching an average of \$2,000 per square foot. Oppenheimer declined to identify any buyers.

The 11 remaining residences, with between one and six bedrooms, cost from \$2 million to \$15 million and range between 1,300 and 8,000 square feet.

For perspective, consider that residences sold this year in the hotel's ZIP code fetched an average of \$545 per square foot, according to Sam DeBord, of real estate search Web site SeattleHome.com.

One draw to the residences is exclusivity.

"Unlike a lot of buildings in town, where you're one of 2,000, here you're one of 36," said Oppenheimer.

Despite their appeal, he admitted he's glad he's not starting to market the high-end residences in today's downturn.

"We wouldn't want to be starting to sell from scratch now," he said. "We've sold 70 percent of the square footage, and that's a big enough hurdle that we can relax and take our time."

The hotel is owned by six people and one group, collectively known as Seattle Hotel Group LLC. The biggest investors, known as general partners, are businessman Oppenheimer, venture capitalist Tom Alberg and former mayor Paul Schell, all of Seattle.

Prominent Seattle businessman Bruce McCaw has a smaller stake, as do two other, unnamed Seattle residents and the Muckleshoot Indian tribe.

That's the same group that unsuccessfully tried to keep the Four Seasons name on what is now The Fairmont Olympic Hotel, said Kathleen Taylor, president of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts of Toronto.

"When that turned out not to be possible, we'd gotten to know each other and we said, 'Let's stay together and do something else,' " she said.

The company's role is to manage the hotel and residences under an 80-year contract with the owners' group.

"Eighty years is not typical for a lot of hotel management companies, but it's very important to our residential owners," Oppenheimer said.

"It preserves the value of their properties, and it also assures them of a high level of service in how the common areas are maintained, how the windows are washed, the room service, even the shining of shoes left outside the door -- all of which will be done by Four Seasons staff."

The new Four Seasons is stepping into a highly competitive market. Between 6,000 and 8,000 hotel rooms are located within walking distance of the Washington State Convention & Trade Center, said David Blandford, a spokesman for the city's Convention and Visitor's Bureau.

About 10,000 rooms are available citywide, and about 32,000 are available in the metro area.

The new hotel's general manager, Ben Trodd, said it will compete most directly with The Fairmont Olympic, Hotel 1000 and W, and in the meetings arena with larger hotels such as the Hyatt and the Sheraton.

Trodd said the hotel has already booked half the 2009 group reservations it needs to flourish, right in line with its goal. A second benchmark -- contracts for corporate bookings -- is "looking very strong as well," Trodd said.

He said he's encouraged by the swelling volume of cruise activity in Seattle, because cruise participants staying a few days before or after their trips traditionally make up a large part of a hotel's business.

Many of the new hotel's employees worked at the Four Seasons Olympic, Oppenheimer said. Some have returned from other parts of the country to work at the new hotel, he said.

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