

# Dateline: Florida

By Matt Alderton

## Hilton Opens Four New Hotels, Fuels Meetings Growth in Orlando

This summer, the U.S. Travel Association broke news of a government blacklist of meeting destinations. Atop that list were Las Vegas and Orlando, which were “the first two on the chopping block,” according to a Justice Department e-mail obtained by the association. Part of what’s now being called the “AIG effect,” the alleged ban on resort destinations was yet another hit in a long hail of blows delivered to the meetings industry this year. While Las Vegas by all accounts continues to reel from the punch, however, Orlando already is gearing up for a return in demand with four new Hilton hotels, representing three brands, that have opened there this fall.

The new hotels—the 1,400-room Hilton Orlando, which opened on Sept. 13; the 497-room Waldorf Astoria Orlando, which opened along with the adjacent 1,000-room Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek on Oct. 1; and the 1,094-room Doubletree Resort Orlando – International Drive, which was re-flagged on Sept. 22 following a \$35 million renovation—collectively add nearly 4,000 upscale guest rooms to the Orlando area, which now has 115,000 hotel rooms. Because 2,400 of those are within walking distance of the Orange County Convention Center—both the Hilton Orlando and the Doubletree are inside the convention district on International Drive—Orlando is newly positioned to compete for the country’s largest citywide conventions, according to Amy Tynan, national sales manager for PRA Destination Management Orlando.

“The AIG effect hit Orlando quite hard because we’re considered an entertainment destination,” she said. “These new properties, however, put a new, positive spin on our city. In the past, the mega-conventions had to stay in Las

Vegas or other cities that had large properties within walking distance of the convention center. Now that we have those properties, we’ll be able to attract more groups and planners. We’ll be able to host the mega-conventions that we didn’t have the rooms for before.”



The new, convention-center-connected Hilton Orlando

Added Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau president and CEO Gary Sain, “We’re not building for 2009, 2010 or 2011. We’re really building for 2012 and beyond because a lot of the largest national tradeshows book five, 10, sometimes 15 years out.”

Of course, the new hotels have no intention of waiting 15 years. In fact, Hilton has been actively selling the properties since well before the downturn hit. “The hotels did a lot of aggressive, pre-opening marketing,” Tynan said. “Because they’re new, they’re generating a lot of excitement. I was at the Hilton Orlando the other day for a site inspection and they’ve been booked with meetings since opening.”

That comes as no surprise to Sain. Despite the recession, he said, Orlando already is benefiting from the buzz created by new hotel rooms, as well as the people selling them.

“Hilton has large sales offices that are selling Orlando more aggressively now because of the

new product,” Sain said. “When you open a new property, it gets a disproportionate amount of exposure from the national sales force. It’s almost like adding to the sales force of the CVB. It produces more leads, more opportunities and more interest in Orlando as a destination, and that should translate into more business.”

In many cases, the brands are selling themselves. “All the new hotels are under the Hilton flag, which is a strong brand,” Tynan said. “Having three different price points within the same brand family makes Orlando more enticing for meeting planners.”

Although they’re all Hiltons, each property brings something different to the area, according to Hilton Orlando general manager Doug Gehret, who said his hotel—the only hotel that connects to the Orange County Convention Center via walkway—addresses the need for high-quality convention center accommodations. “There are a lot of great limited-service hotels in the area, but other than the Peabody, there’s not really another hotel that suits higher-end needs next to the convention center,” he said. “We very much help fill that void.”

The Doubletree Resort Orlando – International Drive also targets that space. Formerly the International Plaza Resort & Spa, the 30-year-old property—which is now the world’s largest Doubletree—has updated “everything that a customer touches,” according to director of sales and marketing Larry Goldman.

“There’s been a need for better-quality guest rooms in a better location,” he said. “Hilton’s investment takes what was at one time a strong meetings hotel and makes it that much better.”

Although it’s located closer to Disney’s theme parks than the convention center, the new Waldorf Astoria Orlando—the only Waldorf Astoria outside of New York, and Orlando’s only five-star hotel—fills an equally important niche. “We get a lot of corporate business in Orlando,” Sain said, “and having the Waldorf

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