

# Bradenton Herald

**Bradenton Herald, The (FL)**  
as provided by The McClatchy Company

October 14, 2010

## **Airport Holiday Inn celebrates its "wow" factor**

Author: JENNIFER RICH, [jrich@bradenton.com](mailto:jrich@bradenton.com)

Article Text:

MANATEE

An explosion of colors surrounded by a variety of geometric shapes has an almost breath-taking impact for first-time visitors walking into the lobby of the Holiday Inn across from the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport.

Fuchsia, orange and lime green colored sofa cushions and carpeting create a visual punch intensified by the details — a waterfall cascading over elevators, an atrium that shoots up six floors to a skylight which cascades natural light. Details like African zebra wood columns, bamboo trims and fish scale wall coverings.

“It’s vibrant but relaxing,” explains General Manager Mohammad Gharavi, “We thought ahead in the design, what people would like five to 10 years from now. We wanted to keep it fresh and modern.”

The 135-room hotel is celebrating its first anniversary in style with a three-day open house beginning Oct. 22 punctuated with cooking demonstrations and specialty dishes served in its Sporting News Grill — one of 20 being built across the country in a partnership between Sporting News Magazine and Holiday Inn. Z-space, a hospitality designer in Fort Lauderdale, created the prototype of the restaurant.

“Our goal was to give the captive audience upstairs a new experience,” said Z-space owner Peter Zakas. “Most people don’t want to eat in a hotel so we made it look independent.”

Chef Darrell Mizell, formerly with the Sunhouse restaurant in Longboat Key and Christopher’s on Lido Beach, will be serving his food specialties blending Caribbean and Asian flavors. Dinner service will include free champagne.

It’s been a tough year for the 90,000 square-foot hotel whose operators like to describe it as “spectacular” and “unique.” With a queasy economy and less than spectacular tourist season, Gharavi says, “Thank God we had a hotel that made the competition open their eyes.”

Since being built in 2009, two more hotels — both Hampton Inns — have added hotel room inventory to the area, making competition stiffer.

“Last year was full of opportunities,” Gharavi says with a smile.

“Our biggest challenge has been that people haven’t heard about us yet,” says Tom Yorke, director of sales and marketing for the hotel. He and Gharavi tout the fact that the hotel is the only full-service hotel between downtown Sarasota and Lakewood Ranch.

But both are looking forward to the beginning of the tourist season in December.

The hotel, with room rates from \$100 to \$275, draws about 30 percent of its bookings from business travelers and has developed relationships with surrounding companies including those at the airport. With membership in both chambers of commerce and connections with the area’s tourism bureaus and economic development groups, Gharavi says support from the business community and locals has been substantial.

“About 85 percent of our guests on the weekends are local,” said Gharavi, who previously was the general manager for the Hyatt Regency in Sarasota.

Martyne Kupciunas, owner of The Design Garden in Merritt Island, worked on the interior design of the hotel for three years.

“The whole concept was based on the rich history with the arts that the area has,” she said. “We wanted it to be festive with bright colors to echo those themes.” Its modernistic furnishings from low slung sofas to tall, thin, stainless steel salt and pepper shakers was a nod to Sarasota School of Design and a salute to modernism, Kupciunas said.

“The materials we tried to use are completely recyclable,” she said. “The reception counter is made of a resin material that is recyclable.” Unique materials like bamboo are found in touches throughout the hotel. “I always put in some bamboo somewhere in my designs because I lived in Asia for 14 years,” Kupciunas said.

The hotel was designed to be “green” with solar panels on the hotel roof, high-efficiency appliances and LED or fluorescent lighting. Guests have the option of helping save on energy costs by requesting linen be changed every other day.

On the sundeck are colorful outdoor cabanas with a fire pit surrounded by sofas.

“The owner really went to great lengths to do something very different,” Kupciunas said. “We pushed the envelope.”

Jiten Patel, franchise owner of the hotel, said the planning process began in 2005 after a meeting with Oscar Parsons, owner of the Sarasota Bradenton International Convention Center.

“He invited me to develop a hotel,” said Patel, former owner of the Holiday Express on State Road 64. “I went to Europe that summer and was very surprised to see the way hotels are there. It’s a totally different world, they are modern, chic, inviting and warm. I knew I wanted to create something like that.”

With his wife Kirti, an interior design expert, he embarked on the project which ended up with a final price tag of \$25 million, about \$6 million or \$7 million more than the usual full-service Holiday Inn.

Amenities like a heated indoor pool and spa/sauna, full-bar, exercise and massage rooms drove the price up along with the unique design. There also are children’s suites with a separate room for bunk beds and a TV. But Patel’s favorite feature in the hotel is the women’s restroom just off the lobby that features a petal sink.

He’s found there is one predominant reaction from first-time visitors to the hotel.

“Every single guest is blown away, they love the place,” he said.

Copyright (c) 2010 The Bradenton Herald

Record Number: 201010140000\_5fb61da9aa773e61d19f437a52302469