

Hidden gem: New Holiday Inn has bold design



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Old U.S. 301 at the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport may not be top-of-mind when it comes to scheduling a business lunch or a romantic weekend.

But taking the road less traveled has benefits. In this once-busy location, next to the Sarasota-Bradenton International Convention Center, is a Holiday Inn like few others.

Inside the standard-issue Holiday Inn shell, built by Sarasota's Jackson and Associates to Florida Green Building Coalition standards, is a visual treat. Designed by Harter-Adams Architects of Winter Park, the building reveals itself, like good architecture should, with a colorful and contemporary surprise around every corner.

For starters, the glass-ceilinged atrium, a rarity in this region, draws the eye to the five guest-room floors, and beckons guests, once they have settled into one of the 135 rooms and suites, to ride the glass elevators back down to socialize.

Then there's the festive design scheme by Martyne Kapciunas of The Design Garden in Merritt Island. It is a bit like a designer-showcase house, except the look is cohesive throughout the property. With furnishings in lime green, burnt orange and fuchsia, you might actually want to sit down. Kapciunas is a sworn minimalist, concerned about "too much stuff," but she walks the line adroitly here.

Although the hotel caters to business clients on weekdays, it will attract the weekend traveler, even on rainy days, with an indoor spa, massage room, sauna and pool with whirlpool tub. The Sporting News Grill promises to be busy this football season, as fans watch their favorite teams on the nine 50-inch HDTV screens. Chef Darrell Mizell heads the kitchen.

The outdoor dining and gathering spots, with fire-pit and cabanas, have the same bright colors that are found inside, starting with the bubbling bamboo fountain.

Back upstairs, the rooms have triple-sheeted bedding and contemporary furnishings. Reading lights and computer hookups are wall-mounted over-the-shoulder -- facile for those who are not attending a convention of contortionists.

The suites are clever in concept and crisp in execution. There are five kids' suites that have a separate room, with bunk bed, beanbag chair and TV, in which the young ones may be sequestered.

One suite has a two-person spa tub next to the king-size bed. That convenient reading lamp may not get much use here.

This all sounds a little over-the-top for a Holiday Inn, which established its reputation with highway hotels attracting tourists. This hotel caters to private pilots; the corporations, such as Chris-Craft and Honeywell, with locations nearby; and convention clients.

To attract them to a property that lacks waterfront cachet, hotel developers Jiten and Kirti Patel invested the money they saved on the less-than-prime site into the building. Still, at \$25 million, it cost \$7 million more than one might expect to spend on such a hotel.

It represents "a new generation in Holiday Inn hotels," said general manager Mohammad Gharavi.

"It's South Beach -- without the beach."