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The Hyatt Regency O'Hare gets overdue refurbishment

By Jerry Soverinsky

With occupancy levels in line with other major Chicago hotels, at roughly 70%, and a long-entrenched position as one of O'Hare Airport's most popular group and conference hotels, the Hyatt Regency O'Hare could have easily coasted on its favored reputation and enviable airport location without disturbing its dated 1970s decor.

But since the property is "a major hotel in the Hyatt portfolio," renovations were needed to keep up with Hyatt's standards, said Lisa Arias, director of marketing for the hotel.

"So we've undergone a major renovation of the public spaces that will eventually extend to all 1,100 rooms and 41 suites," Arias said.

The first phase of the redesign was no simple paint-and-carpet exchange. Rather, the \$40 million project was a dramatic overhaul that completely transformed the hotel. A second, \$20 million phase of renovation is planned.

Much of the interior's ubiquitous concrete lining is gone; so, too, is the darkness that seemed to hang over a nondescript restaurant and bar that felt somber and lifeless even during the most frenzied conferences and meetings.

The new look presents a bold, sleek, contemporary design for the Hyatt Regency O'Hare, which featured high-lofted, atrium-style architecture when it was built in 1971.

Highlights of the renovation include the new O'H American Grill restaurant, a welcome replacement for its lethargic predecessor, the Garden Terrace.

"We needed a three-meal restaurant. We wanted to compete with [nearby restaurants] Gibson's and Carlucci's," Arias said.

The new venue's homestyle offerings are

designed to appeal to business travelers as well as vacationers, with smartly prepared American dishes that include a generous assortment of meat — the barbecued ribs are a noteworthy specialty — fish and vegetarian options.

Red Bar, the new lobby bar, has 21 plasma-screen TVs and eight media screens sure to satisfy the most passionate sports fans. Those with less interest in balls, bats and skates will find much to enjoy on the bar's trattoria-influenced menu, a robust offering of Italian meats and cheeses, pizzas, pastas and bar fare that accompany the

bar's traditional cocktails and more innovative creations.

Other hotel upgrades are the Hub conference center, with 17 breakout rooms, which replaces the hotel pool; the VIP Regency Club, with wines, snacks and cozy

seating; a full-service business center with 24-hour Fedex/Kinko's; and the Stay Fit Gym, a 24-hour facility with commercial-grade cardiovascular equipment and flat-screen TVs.

"We've raised the bar for airport hotels around the country simply because we are so much more than just a facility in which to spend the night before an early morning flight," said David Jacobs, the hotel's general manager.

Call (800) 233-1234 or visit www.ohare.hyatt.com.

'We've raised the bar for airport hotels around the country.'

— David Jacobs, G.M.
Hyatt Regency O'Hare

The O'H American Grill replaced the Garden Terrace restaurant at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in Chicago.

DESTINATION

USA

Atlanta pitches what's new, but there's history, too

By Eric Marx

Approaching Atlanta on the interstate, it's the towering skyline that visitors first see. A mix of beaux arts and modernism, the spectacle is what I expected from a city that, according to my guidebook, is the economic and cultural center of the South.

That's a heavy reputation to live up to, but Atlanta delivers. Consider the new Georgia Aquarium, billed as the world's largest aquarium: It is designed to accommodate up to six 20-foot whale sharks. The aquarium, home to more than 100,000 animals in five exhibition areas, drew 3.6 million visitors in its first year.

Sitting at the north end of Centennial Olympic Park, the aquarium is next door

to the relocated World of Coca-Cola, presenting a bubbly array of Coke-related artifacts, theatrics, pop art and drink samples. It is just minutes from CNN Center, heart of the Turner Broadcasting empire.

With such emphasis on new attractions, Atlanta is perceived to be a destination that has paid scant attention to the past. Nevertheless, landmarks such as the Margaret Mitchell House and a damaged lamppost from the Battle of Atlanta exist. Visitors should head for the Buckhead district and its Atlanta History Center, the crown jewel of Civil War museums.

The center is included in CityPass and the Atlanta Tourist Loop, a low-cost bus service, that accesses this and other more remote destinations alongside the municipal rail system, better known as MARTA.

Atlanta is home to a rich African-American fabric. The pre-eminent destination is the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, encompassing the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and the King birth home on Audubon Avenue. The library and archives house the world's largest collection of information on the civil rights movement as well as King's marble tomb.

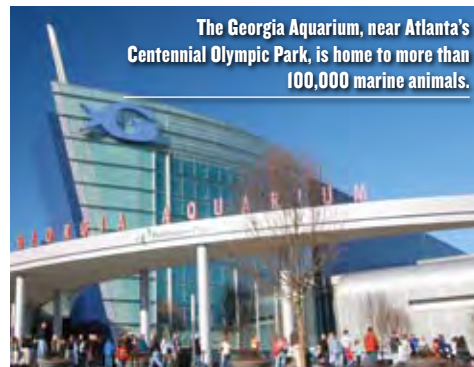
Another Nobel Peace Prize laureate, former President (and Georgia Gov.) Jimmy Cart-

er, also has close ties to the city. His library and museum occupies a hilltop with splendid views of the Atlanta skyline. The facility touches upon the main issues of Carter's presidency, including energy, the environment and relations with China.

As for high art, there's no better bet than the High Museum of Art, a gleaming, white, Richard Meir-designed masterpiece.

Described as both classical and ultra-modern, the seemingly contradictory design elements are apt for a city proud of its past but living in the present and looking forward.

Visit www.atlantata.net/tourtravel/index.html.



The Georgia Aquarium, near Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park, is home to more than 100,000 marine animals.