



Camelback Inn sheds old look for new guests

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There is an old saying that time stands still at the Camelback Inn.

Not anymore.

One of Arizona's oldest and most well-known resorts will embark on a \$45 million overhaul next month, transforming itself into a swinging contemporary hotel that appeals to a younger generation of travelers and locals.

The 10-month-long renovation will completely change the signature entrance to the resort.

Crews will tear down the main building's cylindrical facade, low-slung ceilings and stuffy dining room and eliminate one of the resort's swimming pools.

They'll build a new lobby and bar and add a hip New York eatery called BLT Steak and a second, contemporary Southwestern restaurant. In addition, the new Camelback Inn will feature a Starbucks and a courtyard with green lawns, fire pits, patio seating and a cascading water feature.

The hotel will stay open during the construction.

"We know new customers are coming - Gen X, Gen Y and even the baby boomers," General Manager Ralph Scatena said. "Change is scary, but we recognize we need to enhance Camelback Inn to be appealing to those age groups."

The hotel vows to preserve the original 1930s adobe wing, which sits to the right of the property's front steps, but most of the main building, added in the 1970s, will be knocked down.

Camelback Inn's renovation is the largest and most expensive in a flurry of Valley hotel upgrades this year.

Others spending millions of dollars to stay competitive in a fierce tourism market include Royal Palms Resort and Spa, the Phoenician and the Boulders Resort in Carefree.

Changing with the times

The Paradise Valley property, nestled at the base of Mummy Mountain along Lincoln Drive, is a rare vestige of history in the Valley.

Built in 1936, it was a Hollywood playground, where stars like Jimmy Stewart did the limbo in the lobby.

But times are changing.

While yesterday's travelers enjoyed peace and quiet, coat-and-tie dining and charming seclusion, today's visitors are more likely wowed by celebrity chefs, modern decor, new technology and an urbanized environment.

Chicago resident John Doumanian, 35, described the resort as "nice for someone who wanted a more-quiet weekend."

"The changes are probably good if they want to attract a younger crowd," said Doumanian, who was in town on business.

"It just seems like it's far away from everything. An upscale restaurant and a couple bars would cater to the younger crowd."

Diane Dunning, 43, had a different impression.

Twenty minutes after checking in, the mother of four from Rogers, Ark., happily reclined by the pool in the shade of faded metal umbrellas.

"It's not like a typical hotel," she said.

"I was really struck by the landscaping and the view. It just seemed really quaint and romantic."

Camelback's move has the potential to woo young and old travelers alike, said Rachel Sacco, president and chief executive officer of the Scottsdale Convention & Visitors Bureau. While young travelers will go for the energetic atmosphere, older loyal customers will come back for the AAA five-diamond service, she said.

"As long as they're not doing a wholesale overhaul change, they're going to get that customer and probably that customer's children down the road," she said.

Other upgrades

In addition to re-creating the heart of the hotel, Camelback will replace its ballroom with an upgraded 20,000-square-foot facility. It will feature the latest technology, including wireless Internet.

The resort's 559 guest rooms, spread over the 125-acre property, will stay intact. But they will get new furniture and linens, in keeping with Camelback's Southwest decor.

Camelback is unique in that it allows individuals to purchase guest rooms.

Those who do become stakeholders in the resort, and they have agreed to cover 25 percent of the costs. The hotel's operator, JW Marriott, will fund the rest of the renovation.

The hotel is determined to keep its rating during the construction. It has spent the past 18 months devising a plan to build a new, interim lobby in its nicest casita. It also will put a restaurant on that site.

In addition, the hotel will close off roughly 70 rooms near the construction work so that guests are not bothered by noise.

Scatena, the general manager, is also working to get employees on board, some of whom have worked there for 30 years. He dug out 1950s video of the hotel to show how it evolved over time and gave them pocket brochures to show inquiring guests.

The Phoenix native said his greatest goal is to blend the old with the new and ultimately preserve Camelback Inn's classic character. He wants to be hip but not too hip.

He is creating a museum in the hotel's old wing, with historic photos and fixtures.

And he is keeping the clock at the entrance, the one with the motto that reads, "Where time stands still."

Even if it's not exactly true.