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Countdown to Grand opening

In Del Mar, workers rush to finish the county's latest lavish hotel

BY PENNI CRABTREE

On a verdant 380-acre swath of land east of Interstate 5 in Del Mar, hundreds of workers are feverishly putting the final touches on a mammoth project that has been more than two years in construction.

Inside a sprawling, Mediterranean-style building, workers last week unrolled handcrafted carpets, polished marble and touched up hand-stenciled and painted cathedral-sized ceilings.

Outside, a landscape crew sporting heavy gloves planted more than 500 trees and laid thousands of pieces of sod in a single day, adding to the 9,500 trees and shrubs that had been planted earlier, while other workers perfected the lighting for a 75-foot-long mosaic tile fountain.

While there are villages in Italy larger than The Grand Del Mar, few are likely to be more opulent than San Diego County's latest addition to the luxury hotel market.

The \$270 million hotel resort, which opens Saturday, sports a lavish blend of Mediterranean-style architecture and intricate interior detail that includes Italian marble, Portuguese tile, Venetian plastered walls, and gilded, painted or burlled wood ceilings, floors and paneling.

And while the theme is Renaissance-by-way-of-Hollywood, the amenities are pure 21st-Century-Spoiled: 218 posh rooms and 31 lavish suites. A 21,000-square-foot spa. Four swimming pools. And an 18-hole golf course designed by Tom Fazio, a name that, among fervent golfers, inspires not so much the desire to swing as to genuflect.

Thomas Voss, president of Manchester Grand Resorts, the division of San Diego-based Manchester Financial Group that developed the project, said the final, hurried days before the resort's opening are something like a dress rehearsal for a major symphony.

These days, Voss, his management team and the resort's 550 employees are spending up to 15 hours a day blowing the heck out of the horns and warming up the strings.

"It is like a big orchestra," Voss said. "Everything needs to be in harmony, to be functional and efficient. And with 550 employees, it needs to be a flawless organization."



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune

Workers prepared to assemble and install a marble fountain at the entrance of The Grand Del Mar, the latest in a string of luxury hotel resorts in north San Diego County, including The Lodge at Torrey Pines, La Costa Resort and the Four Seasons Aviara in Carlsbad.

The Grand Del Mar's swank has been acquired through months of toil and painstaking attention to detail, and the final days of preparation underscore the Herculean effort required to pull off a major hotel project.

One day last week, a team of tailors worked steadily in one room to size uniforms, while in the ballroom a group of young employees were coached through a daylong workshop on service and etiquette, practicing with each other with silver trays in hand.

Lynn Lewis, who oversees 15 employees as director of recreation for The Grand Del Mar, coached eager students on the finer points of pool service, from offering frozen grapes and chilled towels to selecting cucumber slices to soothe weary guest eyes.

The Grand Del Mar

Address: 5200 Grand Del Mar Way

Features: 218 rooms and 31 suites, a 21,000-square-foot spa, four swimming pools, two outdoor tennis courts, a clubhouse and an 18-hole golf course.

Room price: \$400 to \$4,500.

Design: Exotic, Spanish Revival/Mediterranean style of 1920s architect Addison Mizner, who designed the famed Cloister Hotel at Sea Island, Ga.

Developer: Manchester Grand Resorts

Cost of project: Total cost of resort and clubhouse is \$270 million

“We want our people to maintain a particular standard that a luxury resort requires, to understand the verbiage and the service,” Lewis said. “But we also want their personalities to show through, to learn how to speak and engage our guests – we don't want robots around the pool.”

At the end of the day, Jerman Ruiz, 24, who practiced his poolside service manner on two fellow employees, received a 9-out-of-10 for his performance, and was relieved that he had to contribute only one nickel to the employee nickel jar.

“We are still working on the 'you guys,'” Lewis explained, with a laugh. “Every time there is inappropriate verbiage like 'you guys,' a nickel goes into the pot. We'll use the nickels toward a pizza party later.”

Ron Montbleau, who heads the San Diego architectural woodwork company that installed the resort's interior woodwork, spent last week inspecting and putting finishing touches on doors, crown moldings, ceilings and paneling.



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Montbleau said a team of about 120 employees put in two years and 150,000 man-hours designing, making, finishing and installing the woodwork. One of the hardest jobs was creating many of the 23 different wood finishes that were applied to the mahogany, olive, maple, sycamore and alder wood features.

“It's the most fun I've had in my trade,” Montbleau said. “There was a lot of interpretation. We tried to figure out what the wood in an old castle in Europe, 300 years old and refinished three times, might look like, and then we'd try to create that finish. We'd keep trying, again and again, until finally we'd get it.”

Preparations for The Grand Del Mar's opening aren't restricted to the day. For instance, employees began sleeping over in every guest room this week – a kind of working pajama party – testing the lighting, checking the water flow in the showers and reporting any glitches to management.

That attention to detail underscores the high stakes involved in a luxury hotel project, particularly at a time of increased competition, higher construction costs and a softening economy.

The Grand Del Mar, which is pricing its rooms at an introductory \$395 through the rest of the year with suites as high as \$4,500, will be competing with more established North County luxury resorts, including The Lodge at Torrey Pines, La Costa Resort and the Four Seasons Aviara in Carlsbad.

Downtown developers are also competing for the luxury crowd with urban chic offerings such as the newly opened Ivy Hotel; the Hard Rock Hotel, which opens later this month; and the Setai San Diego, which is scheduled to open early next year.

Yet with the proliferation of high-end San Diego resorts and hotels comes the obvious question: How many \$400-to-\$4,500-per-night rooms can a city that isn't Los Angeles or New York support? Time, and the economy, will tell, according to hotel experts.

Nationally, the luxury hotel market has enjoyed double-digit growth in recent years in terms of revenue per available room, according to a report released last month by PKF Consulting, a San Francisco-based hospitality industry consulting firm. But that growth is expected to slow next year.

“The outlook for the luxury segment remains healthy; it isn't the fastest-growing segment, but it's not going backwards and it remains very profitable,” said Robert Mandelbaum, director of research for PKF. “And San Diego has always stood out as one of the healthier markets.”

Voss isn't worried. While declining to discuss exact numbers, he said room bookings are “tracking ahead of pace” and the resort expects to contribute more than \$2 million next year to San Diego's transient occupancy tax, the 10.5 percent tax that is tacked onto local hotel rooms and collected by the city.

On the day Voss escorted some visitors from the news media, the hotel accepted a weeklong booking for its \$4,500-per-night, two-bedroom Presidential Suite which has a private terrace, an indoor/outdoor fireplace and five high-definition televisions, among other amenities.

“I can't tell you who it is,” said Voss, primly. “It's a celebrity.”