

Dream Inn owners dream of shaking dated image

Revamped hotel open for business

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SANTA CRUZ — Bartender Michael Roberts might have the best job in Santa Cruz.

Since the revamped Dream Inn opened this past weekend, the 45-year-old Santa Cruzan has been working full time dropping umbrellas into slushy drinks while looking out at Cowell Beach from his poolside bar.

"I think it has a resort feel to it," the tanned bartender said of the remodeled inn as he stood among guests who lounged on

plush green deck couches and white reclining chairs.

After closing in November for a "multimillion-dollar renovation" — the inn's owners declined to give a specific figure — the 10-story Dream Inn, which towers over Cowell Beach on West Cliff Drive, opened again for business Thursday. One hundred of the hotel's 163 rooms were available for guests; the rest will be available in about a month, said general manager Robin Donovan. The restau-

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A guest at the Dream Inn takes in the view of the Monterey Bay from the balcony of her room on Monday.

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From the lobby to the guest rooms, the Dream Inn has reopened with a new look.



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Dream Inn

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rant and meeting rooms should reopen in early winter.

Flashy, color-block carpet, a newly tiled pool and fancy drink menu — with fruity entries like "Lazy Summer Lemonade" — are a few of the quirky, designer touches that Donovan and others with the San Francisco boutique hotel company Joie de Vivre Hospitality hope will keep longtime vacationers returning while also enticing new guests.

"A lot of people have been coming here for so many years, we didn't want to lose that flavor," Donovan said.

But they did want to ditch the hotel's hard-to-shake reputation as a cinder block eyesore that towers over one of the city's prime stretches of sand.

The original Dream Inn was built in the early 1960s in a big-box style. The 10-story tower was added in the early 1970s.

Joie de Vivre's remodel comes as an alternative to tearing down the building and building again from the ground up, as has been proposed at least twice.

Nearly two decades ago, a proposal to build 240 rooms across the street with a conference center and parking garage went nowhere. In 2005, then-owner Western Hotel Properties wanted to build a new \$130 million hotel and conference center. That plan fell through amid public outcry; the company sold the building shortly thereafter.

The current owner, Ensemble Hotel Partners LLC, chose an easier route. Last year it hired Joie de Vivre to spruce up the existing hotel.

The company also held a contest asking residents to pick a new name for the lodge, which was then known as the Coast Santa Cruz Hotel. Residents overwhelmingly voted for a return to the name Dream Inn. Joie de Vivre bought the naming rights from a New York-based hotel operator, and a retro logo was unveiled earlier this year.

The redone rooms feature splashy colors, kitschy desk chairs, surfer art and photographs of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

Summer rates are running at \$279 Sunday through Thursday, and \$399 Friday and Saturday. Ongoing promotions drop 10 percent off the weekday price and 25 percent from weekend rates.

"They have obviously gone to tremendous effort to make it reflect both the Santa Cruz community and the clientele that will be drawn to Santa Cruz," said City Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews. "They brought a really high level of imagination and design and vision."

Guest Brian Durkee, 35, of Los Gatos said he and his fiance, Leina Tanikawa, 30, didn't know they were the first guests in their remodeled hotel room until they unwrapped the plastic from the hair dryer's cord. They did, however, enjoy the new design.

Durkee grew up visiting Santa Cruz, he said, and always wanted to stay in the Dream Inn. Monday, he enjoyed waking up and checking the waves at Cowell's before grabbing his surfboard and heading for the water.

"We're going to come back at least once a year and pretend we're really far from home," Durkee said.

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