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What Westchester Hotels Are Doing To Attract Your Business

The county's hotel market is on fire, and both new and renovated properties are pulling out all the stops to compete for guests.



The Royal Regency Hotel in Yonkers has recently renovated their Crystal Ballroom, where the hotel's second annual "Easter Eggstravaganza" was held this past spring.

With the economy humming, Westchester's hotel scene is taking flight—literally, in some cases. Plunk down \$4,705 at the Castle Hotel & Spa in Tarrytown, and you can treat yourself to a luxury helicopter tour package. A chopper will pick you up in Manhattan, fly you up the Hudson River as far as West Point, and circle back to land at Westchester County Airport. Then a limousine will dispatch you to the hotel, where Champagne will be waiting.

You can take a tour of the wine cellar and enjoy a couples massage before retiring to a spacious luxury suite. "It has become quite popular," says Gilbert Baeriswil, general manager of the property, which opened a new spa building on its 10-acre property in November 2013.

The Castle Hotel & Spa isn't the only hotel making the most of Westchester's growing reputation as a destination for both business travelers and tourists who want to enjoy the Hudson Valley's attractions and/or stay close to Manhattan without paying its hotel rates. "The majority of our full-service hotels have all undergone major renovations," says Natasha Caputo, director of Westchester County Tourism and Film.



In almost every nook and cranny of the county, there are new places to stay, renovations taking place, or new spa packages and events to lure more guests. Developers seem undaunted by the potential for oversaturation of the market. Owners are betting that, with the economy relatively healthy, the money they are investing will pay off.

Their efforts are making a major difference in the county's economy, in which tourism and hospitality make up a \$1.7 billion industry that employs 24,000 county residents, according to Caputo. Against this backdrop, communities are realizing that if they don't have a decent hotel, they're going to miss out on the action. New Rochelle is among them. "New Rochelle only has two hotels," says Commissioner Luiz C. Aragon at the New Rochelle Department of Development. "If you try to get a room in New Rochelle, good luck—they're always booked. We know there is a big demand for new hotels as we grow and develop."

With Renaissance Downtowns and RXR Realty selected as master developers for downtown New Rochelle, the city could soon be home to a new hotel—and "hopefully more than one," Aragon says. An eight-story, 80-room boutique property called Vib is undergoing the approval process to open on Church Street, he says.

Yonkers is also seeing an uptick in hotel activity. Hyatt Place New York/Yonkers, a new 155-room hotel located at 7000 Mall Walk, near Sarah Lawrence College, held its grand opening in June. Earlier in the year, the Royal Regency Hotel, at 165 Tuckahoe Road in Yonkers, broke ground on a multimillion-dollar renovation. It completely revamped 88 standard rooms and five suites in the upper and lower lobby area, using a trendy color palette based on Pantone purple.



The Royal Regency Hotel in Yonkers revamped its guest rooms and lobby last year. It's one of several recent Westchester hotel renovations, driven by increasing competition.



“It’s a much more lavish setting,” says Maria Pampafikos, co-owner and vice president of the family-run hotel. Pulling it off wasn’t easy, but her team toughed it out. “We stayed in operation during the entire renovation,” she says. “We are almost done, and we’re confident it will be worth it, and our guests will be very happy.”

In White Plains, the Cambria Hotel & Suites began booking guests in October 2014 after three years of land development and construction. (Meyer Jabara Hotels, based in Danbury, Connecticut, is the property manager.) The hotel was running at 92 percent occupancy in June, according to Sean Meade, general manager. The Choice Hotels property, where all 130 of the rooms are suites, offers an on-site restaurant and outdoor terrace space and has been attracting business travelers, along with local business and social events. It has been booked for business meetings for around 90 business people two or three times a week, Meade reports. In early June, for instance, PepsiCo hosted a social hour for 50 people as part of a three-day meeting at the property. “What most companies will do is [book] 20 to 25 rooms for their travelers from other parts of the country,” says Meade.

To make it easy for guests to travel into New York City, Cambria Hotel & Suites runs a shuttle to the Metro-North train station and Westchester County Airport Monday through Friday. “Why pay \$400 or \$500 a night in Manhattan when you can get an affordable, brand new hotel room here?” says Meade. “You can be in Grand Central in 35 minutes.”

Meanwhile, in Rye Brook, the Hilton Westchester recently refreshed all 445 of its rooms. “That’s very important when the business landscape is very competitive,” says Caputo. With many guests toting electronic gadgets, some hotels are turning to free WiFi to gain a competitive edge with both business travelers and tourists.

The Royal Regency Hotel, for instance, offers complimentary WiFi in guest rooms and common areas, and the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Tarrytown has for the past year offered free WiFi in its guest rooms. “That’s the number one complaint in the industry—people don’t want to pay for Internet,” says Rich Friedman, general manager at DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Tarrytown.



Why are area hotels rushing to raise the bar? There is a lot of business to be had. With hotel rates sky-high in Manhattan, less-expensive lodgings only 20 to 40 minutes away in Westchester now look very appealing.

“We do have guests that stay here and travel into the city on business,” says the Royal Regency’s Pampafikos. “There are some [guests] from overseas who want to do the tourist thing in Manhattan but don’t want to pay Manhattan rates.”

Some properties are offering packages that cater directly to guests destined for New York City. The DoubleTree by Hilton, for instance, offers special Yankees packages. “People come here and take the train to Yankee Stadium all the time,” says Friedman. “They stay here for the night, catch the train, and come back.” It takes about 30 minutes to get to the stadium, he says. There are other benefits to staying the night in Westchester, he adds: “The train station is five minutes from here, and parking is free.”

To introduce customers to their newest features, some hotels are offering seasonal packages. For instance, this past spring, the Royal Regency held its second annual “Easter Eggstravaganza” in the hotel’s Crystal Ballroom, which has been recently renovated. It included a buffet-style Easter breakfast, a photo shoot with the Easter Bunny, and other activities for kids. “We’re looking to be reintroduced to the local community,” Pampafikos says.

Another trend at local hotels is known in the industry as “experiential entertainment”—activities that involve the guests. At the Castle Hotel & Spa, for instance, chefs at its Equus restaurant offer demonstrations of food preparation techniques for groups of tourists. An upcoming group of about 30 visitors from Japan will enjoy the demo as a part of their lunch in a private room at the Castle. “We’ll do a demo of some of the items we’ll be eating that day, and then we’ll serve them the meal,” says Baeriswil, noting that the demos can be hands-on if the guests want to assist the chef.



THAAN Sanctuary Spa's Relaxation Lounge at Castle Hotel & Spa

But not every guest wants to roll up his or her sleeves and help in the kitchen—and that is just fine with the team the Castle. The hotel offers options through its spa, such as the Awakening Day Package, which includes a 90-minute Thai massage, a unique treatment where the therapist is with the client on the massage table, doing “assisted movement and lengthening of your muscles,” Baeriswil explains. The package has been a hit with hard-charging business types. “A lot of companies use it as an incentive,” Baeriswil notes.

The package also gives the property what it needs—a way to differentiate itself in a market where it’s not as easy to do that as it once was, thanks to proliferating options for guests. “I don’t think too many properties around here offer something like this,” Baeriswil said. “It’s pretty unique.”

To stand a chance in Westchester today, hotels need to stand out.