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No Reservations On Going Green



Tampa Tribune photo by KENNETH KNIGHT

Punit Shah, president of Liberty Group of Companies, eases into a chair in the lounge and dining area at the Holiday Inn Express Suites. Shah, 28, said he incorporated eco-friendly elements in the project to showcase environmental sustainable products and to market his business.

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By KENNETH KNIGHT

The Tampa Tribune
Published: October 17, 2008

NORTH TAMPA - When Randy Hoch of Palm Bay checked in at the new Holiday Inn Express & Suites near Busch Gardens last week, he stepped into a green zone.

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Energy-saving light bulbs in pendant fixtures bathed the front desk in light. Safari-themed murals were positioned on wallpaper made of bamboo that covered walls in the hotel's lobby; and dining room.

The bathroom in his Hoch's room had a low-flow shower head and dual-flush toilet, which can flush half the water or the full amount as the situation requires, conserving water.

A small sign in the bathroom invited him to reuse the towels and linens a second day to save water and energy.

The thermostat to control the air-conditioning system in the room was operated via motion detector, which allowed the unit to come on automatically when Hoch was in the room and turn off when he wasn't.

Hoch, a veteran who was in town for a doctor's appointment at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center, said he didn't know what to expect when he registered for an overnight stay at the newly opened hotel, but he was pleasantly surprised.

"It was very nice," Hoch said.

Punit Shah, president of the Liberty Group of Companies, said it is those kinds of testimonials that reaffirm his decision to "go green."

"This is a green building," Shah said. "We have integrated green elements into the project to ensure environmental sustainability."

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As the movement grows, so does a need for lodging establishments catering to eco-friendly travelers. Hotel owners are beginning to include energy and water conservation programs at their properties as cost savers and to demonstrate to environmentally conscious customers that they care about the environment.

"We did it because we have a responsibility to our community," Shah said. "It also helps us market the property. They [guests] feel better about going to a hotel that will promote the sustainability of the environment."

Shah said he made a substantial investment to advance the green movement at the \$15-million hotel. He predicts thousands of dollars will be saved over time in energy and water costs.

"We do a lot of things to encourage energy conservation," Shah said. "It's something we do at all of our hotels."

The Holiday Inn Express & Suites at 2807 E. Busch Blvd. is independently owned by Liberty Busch Gardens LLC and operated by Liberty Hospitality Management. Both companies are subsidiaries of the Liberty Group of Companies, a family-owned hotel and condo development company based in St. Petersburg.

Within the past year Liberty transformed 3.3 acres at the site of the former Faze 2 Lounge on Busch, just west of 30th Street, into an upscale, modern hotel with a free breakfast bar and free high-speed wireless Internet access. The 123-room inn made a soft opening Oct. 9.

Shah said he was inspired by Busch Gardens' jungle safari theme when deciding to design and build the hotel. He initially planned to convert the nightclub to a restaurant or open retail space.

He gathered a local team of tradesmen, consisting of an architect, builder and interior designer, to make his hotel a reality.

Wichman Construction Co. of Tampa won the contract to build the hotel, which took 10 months to complete.

Shah decided to deck out the 69,000-square-foot hotel and meeting facility, using animal print designs in fabrics, wallpapers made of bamboo and tropical foliage prints.

Shah said it also was his decision to include the eco-friendly elements that would make the hotel eligible to apply for the state's stringent Green Lodging standards.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection launched the Florida Green Lodging Program as a way to encourage hotel and motel owners to conserve energy.

Hotels and motels receiving the certification must comply with a myriad of environmental awareness practices, including setting goals for staff and guests to conserve energy use by implementing a linen and towel reuse policy, recycling paper and cans, using water-saving laundry methods, eliminating toxic chemicals in housekeeping and installing low-consumption plumbing fixtures.

Travel experts at AAA Auto Club South in Tampa said they don't know the extent to which "green" hotels appeal to business and leisure travelers. They plan to survey their members on the matter.

AAA spokesman Gregg Laskoski said many hotels and motels would like to be perceived as participating in the green movement, but it's unclear whether it makes a difference.

"We want to find out how important it is to have hotels that are eco-friendly," Laskoski said.

Shah said his hotel was designed to be the smart choice for value-conscious business and leisure travelers. Room rates range from \$129 a night for a single or double-bedroom to \$299 for the presidential suite on the fourth floor.

"We built the hotel with families and kids in mind," Shah said.

Other amenities include an outdoor swimming pool, flat-screen televisions in guestrooms and suites, a fitness facility, business center and free transportation to Busch Gardens.

Punit Shah runs the family business with his father, Raxit Shah, and mother, Ketki Shah. His younger brother is a physician in Atlanta.

The family started the business in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1981, before moving to the Tampa Bay area six years ago.



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The Holiday Inn Express & Suites on Busch is the company's first hotel in Tampa. Liberty also operates an assisted-living facility in Tampa, a Holiday Inn Express & Suites in Sebring and hotels in Ohio.

Shah said he is not one to rest on his laurels. Before the hotel project was completed, he had secured a piece of the action for the Super Bowl game to be played at Raymond James Stadium in February.

"We are already sold out for the Super Bowl for two weeks straight," Shah said. "When you are in our business, there is a lot of advanced marketing."

He is making plans for a major hotel construction project in downtown St. Petersburg. Shah doesn't have a commitment from a hotel chain, he said, but he is moving forward with the project tentatively called Liberty Bayfront.

Shah said he wants everybody who stays at his hotel to feel all their needs were met.

"We want to give you a reason to visit again," he said.

Reporter Kenneth Knight can be reached at (813) 865-4842.

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