

TRAVEL WEEKLY

March 9, 2009
Circulation: 40,267

For every

Waldorf to be Disney's new neighbor



By Jeri Clausing

ORLANDO — There are a lot of hotel projects in the works today. But few are as noteworthy as the Waldorf-Astoria Orlando.

It's the first Waldorf-Astoria to be built from the ground up since the flagship property in New York nearly 80 years ago. It is the first major resort bordering Disney World to be developed in decades. It's part of the largest development in Hilton history. It is one of the few major golf resorts in the area to have no timeshares or any residential development, which means the Rees Jones championship golf course will be wide open for guests and the public.

Hilton Hotels has picked a significant opening date for the property: Oct. 1, the 78th anniversary of the opening of the first Waldorf-Astoria in New York and the 38th anniversary of the opening of Disney World.

"These dates just fell as we dug and dug," said Tom Clarke, marketing director for the Waldorf-Astoria Orlando.

Hilton, which owns the brand, has added a number of resorts, such as the Arizona Biltmore Resort & Spa and the Grand Wailea Resort Hotel & Spa in Hawaii, to its Waldorf-Astoria Collection. But it has only recently begun its push to add properties that are actual Waldorf-Astorias, its most exclusive and luxurious brand. Other Waldorf-Astorias are being built in Beverly Hills, Calif.; Sarasota, Fla.; Philadelphia; Montreal; and Shanghai.

Hilton, which is a part owner of the Orlando project, hosted a group of luxury-focused travel agents and travel writers on a recent tour of the property, which is being constructed along with the Hilton Bonnet Creek on land bordered on three sides by Walt Disney World.

It's a 482-acre tract that Disney, despite decades of efforts, was

never able to secure.

"We like to say we are the largest landowner outside of Disney and the second-largest landowner within Disney," said Clarke.

The story behind the land remains a bit of a mystery. While Hilton officials declined to name the family that sold the land, they said it was a tract that Disney repeatedly tried to buy over the years.

The owners of the land, Clarke said, "turned away millions of dollars. ... It was legend."

Hilton officials said they didn't think the original landowner necessarily had a grudge against Disney but possibly wanted to hold the land because of its wetlands and wildlife.

Eventually, the heirs sold the property. Hilton said that as part of the development, it is preserving 75 acres of wetlands and is using only plants indigenous to the area, forgoing imports of more tropical foliage from South Florida.

The land is adjacent to the Epcot park and next door to Downtown Disney, the shopping, dining and entertainment section.

The Waldorf-Astoria will include touches reminiscent of the New York original, from a grand clock in the middle of the lobby to the same floor tile patterns and art deco photos in the guestrooms.

The design, Clarke said, is a "balance between a classic and a resort."

In addition to top-of-the-line furnishings, amenities and decorations, Clarke said the hotel would also use the latest technology, including microchips that let butlers and housekeepers know if there is anyone inside a room.

"Because a knock on the door is an annoyance," Clarke said.

Although the resort is scheduled to open in a year that many fear will be among the worst in hotel industry history, Clarke and Peter Kacheris, managing director of the Waldorf and adjoining Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek, said they were confident in the long-term prospects for the market.

"I wouldn't underestimate the power of Orlando," said Kacheris. "There are 120,000 hotel rooms here, and they have maintained a 90-plus occupancy for the past four decades."

The Waldorf will bring its signature Guerlain Spa and New York restaurants to Orlando. The new hotel will have a Bull & Bear Steakhouse, Oscar's Brasserie, Peacock Alley Restaurant and Sir Harry's Lounge. Unlike the New York property, it will also have a pool grill.

Adjoining the Waldorf — the



A rendering depicts a clock in the middle of the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria Orlando, scheduled to open Oct. 1.

properties are separated by a covered walk and some 150,000 square feet of meetings space — is the Bonnet Creek Hilton.

While the buildings appear similar in size, the Hilton will have 1,000 rooms to the Waldorf's 497.

Besides the size and quality of rooms and amenities, the key difference, Clarke said, will be service.

"If you have to touch a door, you're at the Hilton," said Clarke. "If you don't have to touch a door, you're at the Waldorf."