



Success of Embassy Suites shows pent-up demand for high-end hotels in St. Augustine

By Colleen Jones
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Just months after opening in December 2018, the Embassy Suites by Hilton in St. Augustine Beach was operating regularly at 90% occupancy or higher.

Often, it can take a few years to establish a reputation and following over what the hospitality industry calls a “ramp-up” period, according to Shawn Gracey, executive vice president of hospitality for Key International, owners/developers of the Embassy Suites St. Augustine Beach Oceanfront Resort.

“It’s been beyond our expectations,” Gracey said.

The property was able to put another feather in its cap recently, earning a AAA Four Diamond rating. With such stringent criteria, just 6% of the more than 27,000 hotels inspected each year by AAA earn the designation, and fewer still within their first year of business.

As a tourist destination, St. Augustine has many hospitality options, from no-frills motels to Airbnb rentals, brand-name chains to mid-level independent properties.

But the success of the Embassy seems to point to the pent-up demand for the kind of elevated, amenity-filled experience the hotel — its oceanfront views, resort pool, fire pits and on-site dining and cocktails — can offer. Rates vary by season and days of the week but generally range from \$189 to \$399.

Richard Goldman, president and CEO of the St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors & Convention Bureau, believes one of the keys to the property’s success is that it’s helping fill a void.

“We’ve been talking about the gap in levels of hospitality in St. Johns County for years,” Goldman said. “And this is a brand-new product that was very well designed and a well-known brand.”

With 20,000 square feet of meeting and event space and a picturesque backdrop, the hotel has also incrementally built its conference, wedding and prom business.

Gracey said the property’s proximity to downtown St. Augustine and walkable nearby restaurants made it ideal, as did its beachfront setting.

“We were surprised there was no other full-service, luxury hotel in St. Augustine Beach,” Gracey said.

Jason Kern, general manager of the Embassy Suites, described the atmosphere of the Embassy Suites as “upscale, but not pretentious at all” and with a friendly, comfortable vibe.

“Nowadays, people don’t want a cookie-cutter experience,” Kern said.

Goldman increasingly sees St. Augustine moving in that direction.

Two years ago, the Collector Inn Luxury Inn & Gardens — a group of late 18th-century buildings set around a lush, landscaped courtyard — opened downtown and is also a Four Diamond hotel.

“Other properties are stepping up their game,” Goldman said, “that’s the good thing about competition.”

Several other boutique-style inns — one on Kings Street, the other on Riberia Street — are also in the works.

With one solid year under its belt, executives with Embassy Suites say one area they plan to tap into is the local market.

While some residents initially opposed construction of the hotel, Kern said once they see friends and neighbors filling the ranks of staff positions, “I think they see we are part of the community.”

Embassy Suites is also working to draw St. Augustine crowds to its restaurant, Harvest & Reel, launching monthly wine dinner events, as well as a locals night every Sunday after 4 p.m. at the pool bar, Castaway Cantina, offering food and beverage specials.

“We’re also want to encourage repeat customers,” Kern said. “We want to be a place where families create new memories and hopefully come back years later with their own kids.”