

DAILY PILOT

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Wednesday, February 27, 2013

The Newport Harbor News Press Combined With Daily Pilot



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FILLED WITH SALTWATER the Coliseum Pool at Pelican Hill in Newport Beach is 136 feet across and 3 1/2 feet deep.

Looking for perfection

Pelican Hill celebrates its new five-star rating from Forbes, thanks to its culture of service.

BY JILL COWAN

Passing through the thick double doors of The Resort at Pelican Hill's employee entrance feels a little like going to school.

The broad, windowless corridor has the kind of floor that's good for rolling carts and making shoes squeak. The white walls are plastered with handmade collages and

bulletin boards announcing upcoming events; and banners touting values like hard work and collaboration hung from the ceiling.

While first-time visitors may note sweeping views of the coast, or the quiet calm of one of the more authentic Tuscan-style villages outside of, well, Tuscany, it's what happens back here, said Managing Director Giuseppe Lama, that has helped the Newport Coast resort earn its most recent accolade: five stars from Forbes Travel Guide. The 2013 ratings were announced Tuesday.

"It's all about attitude, it's all about personality traits," he said. "We can teach you behaviors."

Together, those banners remind employees heading into work about Pelican Hill's culture of service. It's that culture, Lama said, deeply ingrained into the resort's 900 employees, that has been key in creating a standout guest experience.

Pelican Hill, which the Irvine Co. opened in 2008, has won praise from dozens of trade organizations for its spa, golf course and

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other facilities. Last year marked its fourth to receive an AAA Five Diamond award.

And based on 550 evaluation criteria, that Pelican Hill guest experience was special enough to merit Forbes' top honor.

In becoming the first Newport Beach property to earn the Forbes five-star ranking this year, Pelican Hill joins Orange County hospitality heavyweight the St. Regis Monarch Beach.

Worldwide, 76 resorts have earned the distinction. This year, Montage Laguna Beach also jumped to the five-star level.

"It's really an exhaustive set of standards — the most rigorous in the industry," said Jayne Griswold, executive vice president of Forbes Travel Guide and its home site, Startle.com. "The moment you step on the property, the number of seconds it takes for the valet to reach your car, the number of minutes it takes to deliver your bags. Also looking at, are the staff smiling and engaging you? Making conversation that's appropriate and relevant?"

She said inspectors considering whether to hand a hotel that fifth star typically visit and stay "completely incognito" at least twice.

And their inspectors, Griswold said, are usually tough sells.

"We love a seasoned traveler — someone who's



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THE COLISEUM POOL & Grill at Pelican Hill.

not going to be easily bowled over by a bowl of fruit in their room or a glass of champagne as a welcome," she said.

What pushes a hotel — be it a 28-room inn in North Carolina or a 700-room hotel in Colorado — to the five-star level is the staff, Griswold said.

On a recent tour through some of the lesser-seen areas of the resort's 504-acre grounds, like a particularly idealistic principal, Lama did his best to greet each of the "students" individually.

"Hi, how are you!" he called to employees strolling to check out their pristine uniforms from a station down the hall.

He pointed out collages of photos from staff events and said hello to Executive Chef Jean-Pierre Dubray, who plans menus not only for guests, but for the employee cafeteria, which serves about 400 meals a day.

"Today was Greek," Lama said. "Good protein."

Somewhere outside, a few kids splashed in the world's largest circular pool covered in thousands of hand-laid mosaic tiles. Fires crackled in huge hearths framed by tapestries from Italy, and the golf course and Pacific Ocean were within view.

In some of the resort's 204 bungalows, which start at \$495 per night, and its 128 freestanding villas, which go for more than \$1,200 per night, guests hung out under wood-beam ceilings in rooms stocked to their exact specifications.

Lama, who has three decades of hospitality experience, said keeping all the moving parts running smoothly requires commitment from everyone involved.

"Perfection doesn't take a day off," he likes to say.

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