

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## Ritz-Carlton's first resort in the state brings a top-of-the-line brand to a secluded spot in Marana

Arizona Republic - Phoenix, Ariz.

Author: Dawn Gilbertson

Date: Dec 26, 2009

Southern Arizona has the requisite amenities for a desert tourism playground: sprawling resorts with water slides, umbrella drinks and championship golf, two renowned wellness spas and outdoor attractions galore.

But until this month, something was missing from the region's lineup: luxury lodging. Tucson has plenty of upscale resorts but no top-of-the-line brands and no AAA five-diamond winners. Scottsdale, in comparison, has six.

The arrival of the Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain puts the region in a new league. The 250-room resort, a Lake Tahoe-style lodge nestled in the foothills of the Tortolita Mountains in Marana, is the first Ritz resort in Arizona and only the second Ritz-Carlton hotel in the state. It is the chain's 75th hotel.

Combined with the multimillion-dollar Ritz-Carlton Residences and the Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, the 850-acre development is the largest Ritz-Carlton development in the continental United States.

Industry insiders say the resort will help put the Tucson area on the radar of vacationers and businesses looking to hold meetings or incentive trips for top performers.

"A lot of people don't think of Tucson," said Stephen Deucker, director of sales and marketing for the new Ritz.

Jonathan Walker, chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau, has been helping sell the Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain.

"The Ritz is well known as a luxury brand in the United States and indeed around the world," he said. "For Tucson to have one really puts us in a unique position."

Deucker, who transferred from a Ritz in Sarasota, Fla., and was this Ritz's first employee, concedes the Dove Mountain master-planned community and Marana, northwest of Tucson, aren't exactly household names.

But he says the resort's setting has proven to be a stunning closer for visiting travel agents and meeting planners. Three out of four site visits have turned into bookings, double the norm, Deucker said.

"You get people here, they look out, they love it," he said.

The Ritz is the first resort to open in Tucson since the 575-room JW Marriott Starr Pass in 2005.

The timing difference could not be more stark. The Marriott opened when hotel occupancy was rising and room rates were increasing at a double-digit clip, the industry's first strong year after the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

The \$160 million Ritz, part of the Marriott family of hotels, debuts in what some call a hotel depression

. Tucson-area hotels and resorts, like those in greater Phoenix, have posted some of the largest declines in the country in key measures such as average daily rate and revenue per available room, with the latter down 23 percent year-to-date through October.

Tucson hasn't had a huge increase in new hotels as has Phoenix, but has been hit much harder by airline flight cutbacks in the past two years. For example, the airport lost non-stop service from New York, a key market for Arizona in the winter.

Similarly, the Ritz-Carlton chain has performed the worst of any Marriott brand because luxury has been hit so hard.

"Unfortunately, Ritz-Carlton and, probably, Tucson have been in the crosshairs of just about everything that's been bad," said Patrick Scholes, hotel industry analyst with FBR Capital Markets.

The best thing you can say about the timing of the opening, he said, is that it's coming at the end of a brutal year, with early signs the worst is behind the industry.

Kathryn "Casey" Bolinger, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Scottsdale-based Greenbrier Southwest Corp., one of the resort's developers, said she's happy the Ritz is opening now instead of a year ago.

"I think people are getting tired of being in a recession and not spending," she said. "I feel really optimistic we're on the coming-out-of-it side and that the hotel is going to ride that wave up."

The weak economy is showing up in Ritz's introductory rates, which start at \$259 a night. There is also an advertised package for \$359 that includes a \$100 daily resort credit and breakfast. In better times, peak season rates start around \$500 a night.

Canyon Ranch and Miraval, two well-known destination spas in the Tucson area that draw guests from around the country, are similarly pricey but usually include meals and activities. They are generally after a different crowd than the Ritz, Deucker said.

"We'll offer some of the same things, but at the same time, we're not going to fix your marriage. We're not going to put you on a diet. We're not going to get inside your head."

A Canyon Ranch fan from Chicago, noticing the Ritz pin on Deucker's jacket at the Tucson airport, stopped him to ask when the resort was going to open.

She told him her family was never interested in accompanying her on her spa trips to Canyon Ranch but are excited to try the Ritz, where they can play golf while she hits the spa. She booked a two-room suite for her family's spring break.

Deucker said, "In our first year, we're going to play in everybody's sandbox. I don't think two years from now we'll be going head to head."

With marketing budgets tight, the Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain is targeting Phoenix-area residents first, followed in January by a southern California blitz and some advertising in the Midwest. The resort also expects to get plenty of free exposure from media coverage during the Accenture Match Play Championship at its new golf course.

A big part of the resort's pitch: Experience the desert the way it was meant to be. Bolinger likes to tell the story of how, before the Ritz was built in Wild Burro Canyon, desert jeep tour operators used to bring tourists to the site for its views and isolation.

Her husband, Tim Bolinger, likens the allure of the Ritz to the Boulders Resort when it opened 25 years ago in Carefree. There are no gas stations, convenience stores or restaurants within several miles of the resort. Visitors go through a guarded gatehouse to get to the resort and golf club.

There are 20 miles of hiking trails by the resort built to National Park Service standards.

It was the brainchild of avid hiker David Mehl of Tucson-based Cottonwood Properties. He and the Bolingers' Greenbrier Southwest own 50 percent of the resort, with Cottonwood the majority partner.

"That's what you're going to tell your friends about (the trails)," Deucker said "Five years from now, they're not going to remember the chandeliers or the carpet."

How much does it cost?

Introductory rates start at \$259 per night

The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain

Location: 15000 N. Secret Springs Drive, Marana.

Rooms: 250, including suites

Spa: 17,000 square feet.

Golf: Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, featuring Jack Nicklaus Signature courses, home to the Accenture Match Play Championship.

Business mix: 60 percent vacationers, 40 percent business and groups.

Restaurants: 3.

Cost: \$160 million.

Owners: Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co. LLC, Cottonwood Properties and Greenbrier Southwest Corp.

Web site: [www.ritzcarlton.com/dovemountain](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/dovemountain)