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A suite with a fireman's pole?

San Diego's racy (and pricey) Ivy Hotel and other hot spots are offering guests more than just pillow mints.

By Kimi Yoshino,
Times Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — With rooms starting at \$450 a night, this city's newest hotel is keeping company with some grand dames of San Diego County: Four Seasons Resort Aviara, Hotel del Coronado and the US Grant.

But the only thing strait-laced about the Ivy Hotel is the leather-covered, corseted columns in the lobby.

The 159-room, \$90-million property could pass as Playboy Mansion South, from the skin-baring cocktail waitresses to the \$3,000-a-night specialty suite with king-size bunk beds, a group shower and, ahem, a fireman's pole.

"We wanted something a little voyeuristic, a little seductive," said Michael Kelly, the Ivy's co-owner who has made his fortune buying and selling depressed assets. "It's an adult playground, but it's not cheap."

It used to be that only managers of by-the-hour motels were happy to have their properties mistaken



ON THE JOB: Staff members Wesley Lee, left, and Rianna Elrod prepare a cabana next to the Ivy Hotel's rooftop pool.

for bordellos. But with soccer moms taking erotic dancing classes at the local community college and Carl's Jr. using Paris Hilton (read: sex) to sell hamburgers, some hotels aren't afraid to offer guests more than X-rated pay-per-view movies.

Julie Albright, who teaches classes on human sexuality and social psychology at USC, says easy access to sexual messages and images has shifted the bounds of what's considered socially acceptable.

"It's the pornification of mainstream society," she said. "There's more overt sexuality in our media, on television. More people have cable TV. More people are on the Internet."

Restaurants are also following

suit. In West Hollywood, the adults-only Hadaka Sushi and its "sushi gone naughty" concept serves up ahi tuna on a naked model strategically draped with banana leaves. The experience costs \$2,100 — and that doesn't include the food. Those

on a tighter budget can order more traditional fare from a menu that reads like a smutty novel.

"I think people should break out of their shell a little bit and not be afraid to explore new and different things," owner and chef Edward Brik said. "If you're not comfortable coming in and ordering a threesome roll, you can go to some other boring sushi place and order a spicy tuna roll."

From a purely business perspective, though, the Ivy and restaurants such as Hadaka Sushi are simply differentiating themselves, experts say.

Tom Reichert, coauthor of "Sex and the Consumer Culture" and an advertising professor at the University of Georgia in Athens, calls it "sex-based segmentation."

"It's not targeted to everybody ... but I think there's at least enough people to keep them in business."

The Ivy is likely to raise a few eyebrows in wholesome San Diego, which bills itself as "America's Finest City."

Co-owner Kelly said that was exactly the idea: "This town needed a little style. I left San Diego every weekend and took off to Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami or St. Tropez.... People want, and are willing to pay for, quality and service."

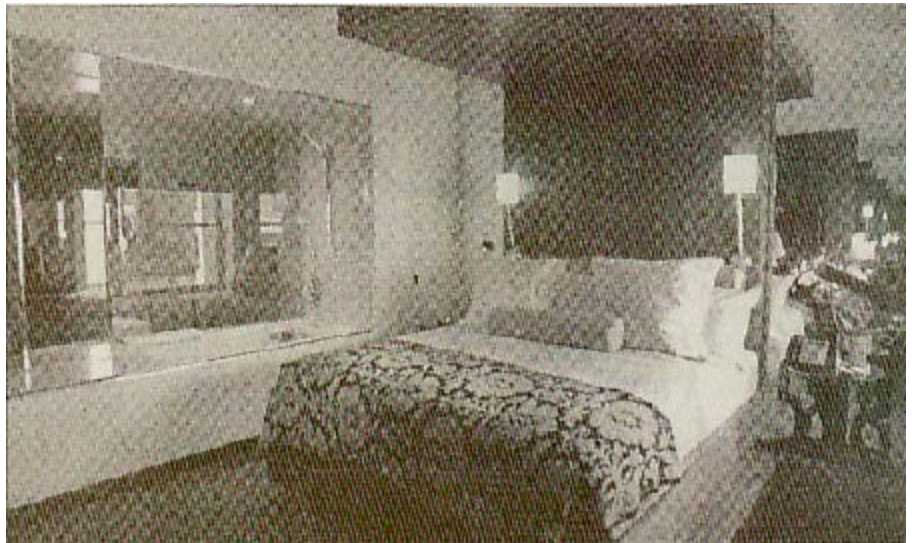
Los Angeles entrepreneur Brad Beckerman agrees. After a recent visit to the Ivy, he's already planning a return trip.

"I was blown away," said Beckerman, founder and CEO of Trunk Ltd., an apparel and accessories company. "This in L.A. would be over the top, incredible. It would kill."

The Ivy's owners say their hotel concept is consistent with the times — and the neighborhood.

Ten years ago, Kelly and his sister Louise opened a bar called the Bitter End in San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter. Since then, the surrounding downtown has undergone a major renaissance, thanks to construction of the Petco Park baseball stadium and a \$216-million overhaul of the San Diego Convention Center.

In the last seven years, convention business has more than



Photographs by DON BARTELLI *Los Angeles Times*
A WIDE-OPEN VIEW: The shower and tub in rooms at the Ivy Hotel share a common glass wall with the bedroom area. Room rates at the \$90-million property, which opened last month in San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter, range from \$450 to \$3,000 a night.



RISQUE BUSINESS: "We wanted something a little voyeuristic, a little seductive," says Ivy co-owner Michael Kelly.

doubled; 574,000 convention attendees came last year, many of them executives who have expense accounts to burn on swanky soirees, pricey rooms and hard-to-find wines.

In the Gaslamp Quarter, bottle service — once reserved for

velvet rope clubs in New York, Vegas and Los Angeles — has "completely changed" San Diego's night life in the last couple of years, said Carl Winston, director of San Diego State University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

"The whole bar scene has gotten tremendously sophisticated here and tremendously expensive," Winston said. "People are buying bottles for \$500 and \$600 for the evening. There seem to be 25- to 35-year-olds who don't mind paying several hundred dollars to entertain friends."

The Kellys are hoping to capture some of this money. At their hotel club, Envy, they are charging \$600 to \$5,000 to reserve a choice booth for the evening.

They are also targeting couples, businessmen and mavens of the L.A. party scene who currently would rather hop a jet to Vegas.

Indeed, the Kellys are merely expanding the practice promoted by Vegas hoteliers. The Palms in Las Vegas has its own version of the Erotic Suite, stripper pole and all. Adventurous guests at Sin City's Hard Rock can order blindfolds, whips and rabbit-fur handcuffs from room service. (All sales are final.)

The Ivy, which opened last month, markets itself as class, not trash. Envy is decorated with floor-to-ceiling photos of legs clad in fishnet stockings and women in lingerie. Instead of curtains, red chain mail hangs from the ceiling. Couches are upholstered in red patent leather with black fringe. And in the restaurant, run by chef Damon Gordon, there is seating for six at a chef's bed.

To set the mood, the hotel is crawling with attractive workers in couture Tadashi uniforms. (Kelly interviewed a pool of

1,500 before settling on a staff of 300.) Hostesses wear black gowns with plunging necklines. Cocktail waitresses deliver martinis in short black lace dresses.

Rooms have a "functional work space" for guests who need to punch in. But visitors are more likely to be impressed by the see-through shower that overlooks the bed.

Sociologist Albright calls places like the Ivy "a recipe for infidelity." Studies have shown that businessmen who earn more than \$75,000 a year and whose jobs take them out of town are more likely to cheat, said Albright, who is studying men who pursue multiple relationships for sex, money or status.

The same demographic tends to eschew hard drugs and heavy gambling but embraces recreational views of sex.

"It's the one area where they allow themselves to be hedonistic," she said. "In the privacy of their hotel rooms is their chance to cut loose, unbutton the buttoned-up oxford shirt."

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