

Global Icon's Newest Destination

The Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain

Biz Tucson

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That's the mantra of the executive team as it prepares to open The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, in Marana on Dec. 18.

"The natural beauty was overwhelming," said sales and marketing director Stephen Deucker of his first visit to the 850-acre property northwest of Tucson. "The setting as you're driving up the hill and start to see the Tortolita Mountains and the giant saguaro forest – it's spectacular. I thought at that point this property has the opportunity to deliver something very, very special.

"This is where the refined Ritz-Carlton meets the Wild West."

The Ritz-Carlton destination resort northwest of metropolitan Tucson sits amidst a lush preserve of rolling saguaro-studded Sonoran Desert. The 250-room luxury hotel features three restaurants, a 17,000 square-foot spa, three pools, a 235-foot water slide, four tennis courts and three ballrooms totalling 16,100 square feet, plus suites, private club accommodations and freestanding casitas. The hotel joins The Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, Dove Mountain, offering 27 holes of Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf, which opened a year ago and is home to the World Golf Championships – Accenture Match Play Championships. Yet to come are 300 custom homes at The Residences at The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain.

Deucker can barely contain his enthusiasm as he describes The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, spirit-of-adventure experience – where guests can enjoy the pristine desert surroundings and native wildlife, including Javelina, bobcats and deer. They can hike or bike on 20 miles of trails, go horseback riding, explore surrounding canyons by jeep, use telescopes to view stars and planets, relax with an outdoor lunar massage, examine ancient Hohokam rock art and even consider a cattle drive. Every aspect of the resort is designed so guests can enjoy being outdoors.

"This is authentic Arizona," Deucker continued. "This area remains true to the Western desert flavor and feeling," unlike the other Southwestern desert destinations like Phoenix/Scottsdale, greater Palm Springs and Las Vegas. "The Ritz-Carlton has been looking at Tucson for over 20 years," he said. Now it's here.

The newest destination resort in The Ritz-Carlton portfolio is the first in Arizona and one of few in the West. It is the 72nd property under the Ritz-Carlton flag. The Ritz-Carlton company manages properties in 24 countries and has 12 sales offices worldwide. This new resort will be marketed globally and is expected to attract many Ritz-Carlton customers to Southern Arizona for the first time.

"The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, will be their first impression of this destination," Deucker said. "This property has a tremendous sense of place. You'll know you are in the Sonoran Desert."

You won't find crystal chandeliers, crown molding or silk fabric on the walls at this modern Ritz-Carlton. There won't even be tablecloths in the restaurants. Guests will find sun-baked adobe bricks, mesquite floors, sandstone and other native rock, hand-carved tables made of alligator bark juniper. Leather, copper, rusted metal and turquoise accents abound. "There's a ruggedness to it that really describes the environment we're in," Deucker said. The architecture and interior design are "very much indigenous to the area."

The architect for the multi-level resort is HKS Hill Glazier Studios, which also designed The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay in California. The hotel's interior design is by Wilson & Associates. The signature restaurant is by EDG Interior and Architecture. The contractor is T. L. Roof & Associates.

The resort abuts the 3,445-acre Tortolita Mountain Park to the east. Land to the south is preserved under a 99-year conservation lease between the town of Marana and the State Land Department. Every room has a view. Guest accommodations range in size from 450 square feet to the top-of-the-line 2,072-square-foot Ritz-Carlton suite and multi-bedroom casitas.

The Ritz-Carlton manages its branded hotel and resort properties but generally does not own them. At Dove Mountain, 50 percent of the hotel is owned by its affiliate Marriott International. The other half is owned by DM Residential Investment Inc., an affiliate of Cottonwood Properties.

"For many years we have been looking for the perfect location to open a Ritz-Carlton resort in Arizona," said Simon Cooper, president and chief operating officer of The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company LLC. "The opportunity with Dove Mountain fit all of our criteria, including world-class golf and spa, but also that 'spirit of adventure' that today's visitors want when they seek a destination resort. Whether for a family vacation or a small corporate meeting, the beauty of the surroundings and the heritage of the American West make for a winning combination."

This fall there was palpable excitement at the property as hundreds of construction trailers moved out, furnishings arrived, carpet was laid and landscaping began.

Some of the luxury details will never be noticed – like double plasterboard walls with air between for soundproofing, service corridors behind every meeting room, a chilled chocolate room, even the foundation of the resort itself – moved 25 feet to preserve two towering centuries-old saguaros. The dark-cocoa exterior paint is custom mixed to blend with the surroundings. Flagstones on the terrace outside the lobby are heated on chilly nights.

Plush carpets are custom woven, not ordered by the yard. Tables handcrafted in the White Mountains retain their natural bark. The front desk includes a low counter where guests in wheelchairs or "Ritz Kids" will check in. The circular spa recalls the ceremonial kivas of Native Americans. Pillars of layered rock reflect the techniques of ancient Anasazi dwellings. Fire pits dot the terraces.

An orchard outside the restaurant will provide guests with fresh-picked citrus. At the CORE Kitchen & Wine Bar, guests can choose to dine at the chef's table,

wine bar, indoors, outdoors, in a private room or sitting at the kitchen counter to watch the chefs perform their culinary artistry.

This Ritz-Carlton brings “a specific brand of luxury that fits the destination – a relaxed refinement,” Deucker said. “This is something everyone can be proud of. Everyone who works here and lives here will want to show it off.”

The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain will be an economic boon to its hometown of Marana, as well as Oro Valley and greater metropolitan Tucson. By December the resort will have hired and trained more than 300 people to provide the “heart and soul” of the resort’s experience. That’s in addition to the 125 who were already working at the resort.

“This project is really special in our company. A lot of people want to come and live in the Arizona desert,” Deucker said.

About 85 percent of the managers are experienced Ritz-Carlton leaders. The top seven executives have a combined 102 years of Ritz-Carlton experience.

Deucker has worked 20 years for Ritz-Carlton at three properties in Florida. He admits he thought the desert would be all sand dunes and rattlesnakes. Then he came to see the setting and meet David Mehl, the visionary developer of the 6,000-acre Dove Mountain master-planned community. Deucker was astounded by what he saw. Once Mehl stated his goal “to create the finest resort in the country,” Deucker quickly decided to move West. He was the resort’s first employee and started work shortly after the slab was poured. His enthusiasm is contagious.

Deucker recalls defining moments with his three children experiencing Arizona – a snowball fight on Mount Lemmon the first time they ever saw snow, riding horses at the White Stallion Ranch and seeing bobcats and Javelina in their yard. “They think they’re on vacation.”

Deucker said that for 2010, the resort’s first full year of operation, there will be close to a 50/50 split between leisure and group travellers. Leisure reservations activity is “very encouraging,” he said. Going forward, they project more group business than leisure. “We’re starting to see some recovery, but it will be a while before we are back to the 2007 levels – probably another two years on the meetings side,” he added.

“A lot of high-level professional corporate meetings and events will look at the metropolitan Tucson area for the first time in a long time because of the Ritz-Carlton name,” Deucker said. “The Ritz-Carlton has a loyal following that rotates between Ritz-Carltons around the world. The idea is for us to expand the market, not cannibalize existing resort group business.”

The resort includes three ballrooms – 9,000, 5,000 and 2,100 square feet, plus an executive boardroom and foyer. Deucker anticipates attracting conferences in growing industries like solar and biotech with ties to The University of Arizona. When he gives tours to meeting planners, “the UA really legitimizes this destination,” he said.

Even with today’s economic challenges, The Ritz-Carlton company continues to expand.

It opened a hotel in Charlotte in October, with another opening in Los Angeles in February 2010. It is also launching two more destination spas this year – first Lake Tahoe on Dec. 9 and the second here at Dove Mountain on Dec. 18.

“The Ritz-Carlton brand is highly desirable,” Deucker said. “Those deals were put together years ago. We must give credit to the owners and developers for having a longer-term vision than the current economy.”

The one frustration this enthusiastic team has when promoting Southern Arizona’s newest destination resort is this: “There’s nothing you can say that will do justice to this property,” Deucker said. “The only way to get the true flavor is come, see and experience. Only once they are here do people really get it.”