

Hotel honored for rooms with an ecofriendly view

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The bathrooms have water-saving faucets, shower heads and toilets. The guest rooms use motion-activated thermostats and energy-saving lightbulbs. The staff makes its own furniture polish. Welcome to Habitat Suites Hotel, an ecological harbor in a sea of concrete. Nudged up against Highland Mall near a crosshatching of freeways, it's easy to miss.

Fourteen years ago, a managing partner began "greening" the 20-year-old hotel by eliminating the use of pesticides. Last week, Habitat Suites won its seventh major award for industry leadership. Nonprofit and corporate sponsors gathered Thursday at the Hyatt Regency Austin for the annual Keep Austin Beautiful awards, where the honors -- polished chunks of recycled blue glass -- were handed out for such categories as litter abatement and community involvement.

Brian Block, executive director of Keep Austin Beautiful, said that a panel of judges chose Habitat Suites for its comprehensive approach to green lodging but that a new solar energy project is what caught their attention. With Austin Energy kicking in a little more than 50 percent of the project cost, the hotel has placed 108 solar panels on six of its highest roof surfaces.

Hotel manager Natalie Marquis said the solar project is the largest in the nation for a hotel and the largest of any business installation in the state. Three energy meters will be installed next week, and an open house will officially announce the program March 26. A sign next to the meters will highlight its benefits. According to the hotel's online brochure, using solar energy rather than just energy from power plants will keep 38,000 pounds of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere each year, which would be equal to taking 3.8 cars off the roads. "The meters will be prominently displayed as part of educating our guests," Marquis said. "We want people to see the meter running backwards."

At this point, the hotel's educational efforts are barely detectable; ecofriendly gestures, such as cleaning with diluted orange oil and composting food and garden waste, are low-key. Many guests "probably don't know how environmentally sound we are," Marquis said. She will soon create labels for the herbs, vegetables and fruit trees planted in small plots around the hotel's 2 1/2 acres. Vegetables and herbs are used by the kitchen staff and guests because all suites are furnished with kitchens.

Habitat Suites belongs to the "Green" Hotel Association, based in Houston, which works with hotels to save water, energy and solid waste.

According to association founder Patty Griffin, the \$3.1 billion lodging industry is learning that ecological practices help the bottom line. Larger hotel chains are purchasing cards from Griffin that allow guests to waive fresh towels and sheets. That minimal step can save a hotel tens of thousands of dollars in utility costs a year.

Habitat Suites operates at a 15 percent to 18 percent lower cost than regular hotels, Marquis said. "I think there's a misconception on the part of many hoteliers that you need all those little bottles of shampoo," she said. At this hotel, the shampoo comes in dispensers. Customers aren't complaining. Marquis estimates that up to 80 percent of the clientele are returning guests, many of them state and federal government employees, who get discounted rates. Regular weekend rates range from \$79 to \$119 a night.

On Thursday, the hotel filled all 96 of its suites, yet it doesn't have a marketing budget. Management prefers to advertise through word of mouth. Guests who recommend friends get \$20 gift certificates to area retailers. Employees also seem to be loyal to the lodging enterprise. Most have worked with the hotel five or more years. "Hotels are notorious for a high turnover for maids. We have a waiting list," Marquis said.

Green hotels

Some of the ways Habitat Suites has gone green:

- *Reflective draperies keep rooms cool.
- *Washing machine recycles second-cycle water.
- *Furniture polish is made from lemon and linseed oils.
- *Instead of chlorine in swimming pool and whirlpool, salt crystals are run over an electrode that produces anti-bacterial sodium chloride.
- *Coreless toilet paper.