

accommodation, most notably in the B&B sector, and the loss of some flagship hotels is however likely to have a positive impact on hotels countrywide.

From a macro point of view, improving the quality and range of the country's tourist attractions, particularly outside Dublin, will be of fundamental importance to the longer term development of tourism in Ireland and can contribute to ensuring the viability of many of the country's hotels. Therefore, recent announcements by Fáilte Ireland to provide funding for flagship tourism projects should be welcomed, particularly if they result in the development of international standard visitor attractions, with broad market appeal and most importantly in locations that will attract domestic and international visitors.

Concerns of overcapacity in some sectors of the hotel market persist. This is particularly the case for some hotels located in secondary locations and for those operating within the 'resort hotel segment'. For many of these properties, it may take longer than originally anticipated to reach a sustainable and viable level of performance. This clearly poses a number of challenges to the promoters and financiers of these projects.

As a response to current competitive challenges in the market, some hoteliers have sought to reduce rates and one only has to look in any of the daily newspapers to see offers of discounted hotel rates available in a number of hotels throughout the country. With competition in the sector likely to remain high in the short term and with downward pressuring continuing to be exerted

on rates, the challenge for hoteliers will be to keep a close eye on costs and take the appropriate steps to manage operating costs and maintain overall profitability.

Sales and marketing activity is also likely to increase in importance. Effective marketing strategies which differentiate individual hotels from the competition and provide a compelling reason why potential guests choose one hotel over another will be critical. At the same time, with an increasing volume of hotel bookings being made online, a strong web presence is a given. This in itself may not be enough as current trends indicate that online travellers cite the hotel's written description and visuals as the top two most important factors when selecting particular hotels. How does your website match up? Marketers and hotel web designers take note.

Ending on a positive note, it is generally accepted that the Irish hotel product has never been better, while the volume of overseas visitors to the country continues to rise.

Although the international traveller is becoming more discerning in their choice of accommodation and competition remains high, it does not necessarily mean that hoteliers will have to slash their rates to win business. By focussing on the service side of the business and the overall guest experience, hoteliers can help differentiate themselves. At the same time, prudent financial and operational management are likely to be important factors during 2008.

In summary, while 2008 is set to become a more challenging year for Irish hoteliers the medium to long-term outlook remains positive. ♦

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GALLEN'S SPA NOTES



Dr Feel Good

AOIBHEANN GALLEN
looks at the medical spa phenomenon

By the late 1990s US doctors began to introduce 'medical spas', combining Western and holistic medicine in a luxurious, spa-inspired environment alongside spa services. Today the medical spa segment is the fastest growing area of the billion euro spa industry.

So what is a medical spa? When people hear the word 'medical' they automatically think cosmetic surgery, botox etc... In fact Medical Spas fall into two main categories: medical aesthetic and medical wellness.

Medical aesthetic spas operate under licensed medical professionals that carry out botox injections, blue peel facials and laser hair removal. These establishments are minimally invasive and require less time to recuperate. Other aesthetic spas have surgeons on site to carry out more aggressive cosmetic surgery such as facelifts. Most aesthetic spas work along side therapists, who offer pampering treatments to help clients recuperate.

Medical wellness spas generally operate under medical professionals and alternative therapy practitioners that pursue preventive health, and combining traditional methods such as hydrotherapy with the most advanced technologies in diagnoses and treatments.

At the recent Professional Spa Excel Show in London, Dr Mariela Oliveria Silveira of the Kurotel Longevity Center and Spa, Brazil gave a talk on Medical Spas. 'If we go back to the '70s, we see the physicians centralising health information and prescribing recommendations and treatments to the patients, which used to follow, but there were lack of resources,' she said. The huge difference from now and then is health information

and knowledge. With information, people are able to discuss what is better for them and also be more active in the treatment process.'

For example at Dr Silveira's Kurotel Spa in Brazil, they use the latest advancements in predictive and preventative by offering the Cellular Revitalization Treatment, exclusively in Latin America. The treatment, which is based on homeopathy and acupuncture principles, stimulates the organs and improves cardiovascular, respiratory and digestive vital functions. This strengthens the immune system and increases organism quality response to aggressive factors such as stress, chemical and sound pollution and an unbalanced diet. Therefore the treatment minimises the susceptibility to diseases and reduces chronic illness symptoms as well as minimising the incoherence between real chronological age and biological age. All of this is also combined with pampering at the spa. In my opinion, this is real wellness. The medical spa business models are succeeding, but will it work across Europe and indeed will it work here in Ireland?

The spa industry grows at 16% per year, and the number of people living a healthy lifestyle will increase dramatically in the next few years, according to the World Health Organisation. Among the Global Spa Trends predicted for 2015 are chronic diseases recovery treatment, lifespan forecast and disease prevention. Society will make positive life style choices and will become an intelligent consumer of health services. Consumers, providers and associated members will seek for effective methods to reach their goals. Here in Ireland, the medical spa might be just the place they are looking for. ♦

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