

BOUTIQUE HOTELS

A hotel that works the art

LISTEL VANCOUVER

Stay with
a Canadian
artist

BY JUDY WASTIUK

Business travellers are increasingly attracted to the coziness of boutique hotels. One such hotel, on Vancouver's trendy Robson Street, is courting the business market with more than data ports, in-room voice mail, and intimate surroundings.

Art is the thing at the Listel Vancouver. On every wall in rooms, corridors and public spaces, the hotel has hung works that would suit a contemporary home, corporate boardroom or chief executive's office — if the boardroom is remotely avant-garde and the homeowner or CEO possesses even a droplet of taste.

Deb Miller, director of sales and marketing, says the Listel is the first Canadian small hotel to join forces with an art gallery. Hundreds of pieces of fine art are showcased — ceramic, statuary, wood and ironwork — by established and up-and-coming Canadian artists chosen by Buschlen Mowatt Galleries, located a block away on West Georgia Street.

The project took more than a year, says Lise Magee, the hotel's director of public relations. "It was the equivalent of curating a huge exhibition, one that won't change much now that it's done, except for the public areas."

The hotel steers interested guests to its "gallery," which will sell pieces of art off hotel room walls (price lists are available on request) or other works by the same artist.

Each of 129 rooms on six floors features works from at least one artist, but the fourth and fifth floors are absolute knockouts. All 54

rooms or suites on these floors were designed by Judy Henderson, co-owner of Henderson Ritter Design Group, a Vancouver design firm. The firm also designed the crisp "pod-style" reception area that stamps the place instantly as personable, but professional.

Toronto-based Pat Rich, managing editor for online WebMD Canada, is a Listel regular. He spends between 120 and 150 nights a year in various cities.

"Vancouver is the only city in North America where I have one hotel where I stay," Mr. Rich says.

He is especially fond of the desks at the Listel. "Hardly anyone thinks of putting good lighting and lots of workspace into a room," he says. "They did."

The hotel originally opened in 1986 as O'Doul's, under the Best Western name. Listel, a small Japanese chain that also owns a hotel in Whistler, B.C., bought the building in 1992 and began a full redesign. The restaurant name stayed, but everything else changed.

Interiors were remade into sleek contemporary spaces that now double as showcases for fine art.

The Listel then struck a marketing agreement with high-end Sterling Hotels and Resorts to attract a more upscale clientele.

Boutique hotels can be pricey and may offer few recreational or business services. The Listel's Ms. Magee questions how often business travellers actually use hotel pools. The Listel had one, but the only people who used it were families, she says. "And we needed more meeting space [so] the pool is gone." The hotel expanded its gym, however, knowing that many business travellers make use of exercise equipment.

As for business services, Ms. Miller says in-room data ports and voice mail are usually sufficient. "Most business travellers don't need a lot of faxing or copying, and our administrative

office will do it for them right away. They just bring what they need handled to reception," she says. "On the rare occasion when there's a lot that has to be done, we'll have it sent out and dealt with promptly."

As for price, rack rates start at \$240 and peak at \$600 for the Artists Series Suites. This compares with starting rates of \$600 for

rooms in some high-end boutique hotels elsewhere. At the Listel, that gets you a whole suite, complete with art and a step-in whirlpool tub that compensates for the absence of a pool — a hot soak rather than a cold swim.

The finishing touch: bedtime cookies — chocolate-chip oatmeal — still warm.

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Tabletop gallery: Fine art dining at the Listel hotel, in downtown Vancouver.

JOHN SHERLOCK