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Vienna House Diplomat will open to the public more

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The Diplomat has, for the time of its existence, been associated with the Vienna House hotel chain (until the 2016 Vienna International). It opened in 1990.

The upcoming anniversary is also one of the reasons for the current renovation, which is being carried out during its full operation, but clients shouldn't, in fact, even notice it. Marek Páleník, General Manager at Vienna House Diplomat Prague, let us know fuller details.

Work commenced in the summer during your full season. Isn't that a little risky? As we are primarily a conference hotel, our busiest season comes in the September – October period and then again in the spring. At the end of July, we commenced with our breakfast restaurant, which is visited by most of our guests, and re-opened it at the end of August. In the middle of August, we also commenced the renovation of our rooms. In total, we have 398 rooms and will proceed gradually floor by floor, whereby each floor will be closed during the reconstruction so that the building hustle and bustle does not affect our guests in any way whatsoever. We will start on the 7th

floor. There are 67 rooms on each floor and each floor will take up to seven weeks work. The eighth floor is left for last, as the rooms and apartments there are a little atypical. The whole reconstruction will take up to 22nd May and will bestow the rooms, as well as all public areas, including restaurants, entrance lobby, congress centre and roof terraces with relevant meeting areas, with a new image.

What are the grounds for renovation?

We won't change any layout nor really demolish anything. That is why we would rather call it a renovation and not a reconstruction. It will include new screed and wall paint, all new equipment and fixtures and fittings in rooms and bathrooms with energy efficient LED lighting in all premises. As for the external appearance of the building, no changes will be made apart from cleaning the façade after 28 years, so the stone will regain its original appearance. We are gradually adjusting the surroundings of the hotel – pavements, walls, and lighting. We would also like to revitalize the greenery along Evropská St. We will get rid of the old vegetation and replace it with nine five-metre grown trees, which will be brought from Italy and once the surface finish is completed, they will be under-lit with LED lights. Looking into the hotel from the outside has so far been prevented by thick bushes, which are difficult to maintain and also conceal mess. We would like to interconnect the hotel visually with its surrounding areas to assist in attracting local citizens.

How do you want to achieve that?

Our hotel was – also with its name – historically mainly intended for foreign clientele, diplomats and various congresses. Our aim is to open the hotel, its restaurants, café and other premises and services to the local community. Once it is renovated, I believe it will also bring in people from the local neighbourhood. We have two large administrative buildings within its immediate vicinity and a third one is being constructed, so there will be some 5,000 people working there. We would like to create an environment whereby people won't feel worried about going and will feel comfortable there. Our prices will also be naturally affordable. Our restaurant has its own independent entrance, which wasn't used in the past, but that will change now. We have also opened a florist at the hotel, the hairdresser's has been there for years, and as of January we will also have a barber shop – as the only hotel in Prague – as approximately 80% of our clientele are men who live or work within the neighbourhood. Clients of these operations have parking for free when displaying their receipts – and a parking place can always be found there. So, the intention is to open up to people visually as well as in reality.

You have mentioned available parking as a distinct advantage. What is the capacity?

The two underground storeys offer 60 parking places and another 30 spaces are available on the surface. Parking is basically for anyone who is interested in visiting. We also have parking places that are leased for the long-term by people and companies from the neighbourhood. Parking is also utilised by hotel guests, conference participants and others.

Does your hotel restaurant specialize in any particular cuisine or style?

In the past, there used to be various concepts of French and Mediterranean cuisine. We realized that people request Czech cuisine more but in a modern lighter style. And with regards to the fact that we are a typical urban hotel, which focuses on conferences and corporate clientele and that our clientele is dominated by men, we decided on a combination of grilled dishes. So, if our Czech cuisine does not appeal to some then salad and steak are sufficiently universal. We have Jan Schánil here as our chef whereby prior to that he worked in several hotels throughout the world. I must say that some guests come here with a lack of confidence – due to the age of the hotel and their first impression. Then when leaving, they speak very highly of their visit to our hotel and are definitely happy to return, especially thanks to our kitchen and service. That is also the reason why the owners of Vienna House decided to renovate the hotel.

Can you tell us about your conference premises?

We have a total of 25 conference rooms, whereby Prague Hall for 450 persons with its theatrical layout, is the biggest. Total capacity is 1,000 places. On the 9th floor, there are three beautiful rooms with terraces and a wonderful view of Prague Castle. Once renovated, they will be fitted with first class technology, for instance, conference calls with all available audio and video equipment. In combination with the aforementioned terrace, it really will represent a VIP area.

Do you co-operate during the renovation with an architectural company?

The whole renovation concept was prepared by the Austrian design company **BWM Architekten**. A uniform line, which stems from the logo, a stylized letter D, runs throughout the hotel. This will also be reflected in our rooms, carpets in the passages and others. Austrian designers proposed a room design in muted tones. There were two variants chosen – one is attuned in blue and follows our business clientele and the other is attuned in muted red and orange and is of an easier tourist character. One will be used in rooms facing the inner block and the other to the outer side. General supplier of the renovation is the German company Riedl, which co-operates with local sub-contractors.

It is well known that you are a sports enthusiast...

Approximately five years ago I decided to change my lifestyle and am trying to combine work and family better and to include sport in my daily programme. Young people don't want to spend 15 hours a day at work as we used to, possibly damaging our health and then looking for ways to remedy it. Vienna House Diplomat can be reached quite easily by bicycle and there are also premises where it is possible to keep bikes safely, where to get changed and where to shower after a morning's run. It is a management strategy and philosophy that I apply. With a healthy lifestyle, people are not ill so much, are more resistant to stress and are therefore more efficient. After some medical problems years ago, I myself started running in order to lose some excess weight. Later I added cycling and then swimming – and that somehow turned to the triathlon. I must also say that my life is a kind of triathlon: family, work and sport. All three parts need to be well-balanced for me to function efficiently.

How does this reflect in your work?

We provide hotel guests with the possibility to run via the mobile concierge app. They can book a morning run with the director – and there will always be those interested, especially during congresses. We have recently completed a circuit of approximately 10 km through Stromovka to Hradčany, which has made it a sort of non-traditional tour of Prague. During the run, I have a chat with them, tell them something about Prague and in return they reveal something about their work. I get valuable feedback as to how they feel about the hotel and if they have any concerns or problems. It is also a commercially successful move as congress guests, for instance, will also return with their families. Morning runs or other sports activities are relatively common in hotels but guests admit that it is rather fitness trainers and not directors who run with them. My colleague from the conference division is a certified yoga trainer, so we also offer yoga on the terrace to those interested, especially those conference participants.

How do the hotel staff view such sports activities?

They take part. They usually have sedentary positions, so they are happy to stretch. Three times a week – at different times so that staff from different shifts or mothers, who rush home after work to their children, could also take part – we offer exercises with our fitness instructor, who prepares circuit training in one of our vacant halls. It is an hour out of their work hours, which they don't have to make up, and also have it paid. On average some eight to ten people come. At these times when there is a lack of employees in our business segment, it is a way to attract and retain employees and stay in informal contact with them. I found that it works better than strictness and formal behaviour. Through sport, we also

join charitable events for the benefit of projects My New Life, Mamma HELP and others. It is not only about raising money amongst ourselves but also about having a good feeling that we contributed actively – so the events usually cover certain runs and competitions whereby the start fee goes to a good cause.

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