

GREAT ESCAPES



The Rittenhouse at Your Service

Philly's charming hideaway caters to nearly any need.

BY STEVEN CASTLE

The Rittenhouse Hotel's Vice President and General Manager David G. Benton sits overlooking Philadelphia's tree-lined Rittenhouse Square, squeezing in bites of his lunch between anecdotes about the guests who have stayed at this now highly regarded establishment.

Benton is a cheerful, middle-aged manager whose very appearance seems to reflect the casual elegance of this modern hotel. In a blue suit complemented by a light blue shirt and a colorful tie, Benton does not come across as an executive with a rigid, starched-collar managerial style. In fact, a casual observer would not peg him as the hotel's chief. Even while joking with the wait staff he appears to be more a friendly regular than the boss.

The conversation with Benton soon turns to the hotel's level of service—clearly one of his favorite topics. He's not afraid to drop names, either, especially since the Rittenhouse has become a favorite of some Hollywood celebrities. Benton tells of how the hotel met actor Bruce Willis' request to turn the shower in his long-term suite into a steamroom. It wasn't easy, but the plumbing magic was accomplished. Then Benton tells of how Willis referred his colleague Tom Hanks to the hotel when Hanks was in town to shoot his Academy Award-

From the spacious Presidential Suite to the sun-soaked Adolf Biecker Spa (inset), elegance abounds at the Rittenhouse.

winning performance in the movie *Philadelphia*. Hanks had to lose a considerable amount of weight for that role, so the hotel staff had to prepare specially designed nutritional meals for him. The stories don't stop with the next course. Benton tells about an

eccentric Texas millionaire who was wooing a woman with a weekend-long dream date that had to be just right. One of the night managers at the hotel stayed on duty the entire weekend to assure that the dream date was orchestrated perfectly. The millionaire reportedly married someone else, but the hotel isn't complaining. The Rittenhouse's job, as Benton sees it, is it gives its guests the very best service it can—and this 9 year old establishment's reputation for providing great service is growing fast.

Service may be a priority at the Rittenhouse, but the ambience of this intimate hotel also shines brightly, from the lobby to the guest rooms. Enter the hotel, and you are drawn into the lobby's Cassatt Lounge, an airy and elegant space with wide comfortable chairs and sofas that invite visitors to relax, conduct impromptu meetings, or enjoy the hotel's afternoon tea. The 98 guest rooms and suites offer no less luxury. All are furnished in a classic style that defies stuffiness with bold splashes of color in the upholsteries and other fabrics, from the smallest rooms, which are about the size of junior suites with attached sitting areas, to the spacious one-bedroom suites, some of which are decorated in more feminine motifs. All the artworks, including some stunning watercolors, are of Philadelphia scenes by Philadelphia artists. The only detraction from the tasteful decor are the metal doors, which seem more suited for a cookie-cutter office building.

Each room comes with three telephones (two with two phone lines each), a TV, and a VCR; suites have two TVs and VCRs, and video tape rentals are available at the front desk. Each room also has a fax machine.

Twenty-three Luxury Suites—in addition to the 98 guest rooms—are available for stays of one night, one month or longer. With huge living rooms, full kitchens, and oversize marble baths with whirlpool tubs, these suites more resemble the condominiums that are located above the hotel's guest rooms. You might never know that the Rittenhouse has permanent residents, since they have a separate entrance and elevators.

The residents and guests do get a chance to mingle in the hotel shops and health spa. Adolf Biecker Spa is a favorite of many residents, with its indoor pool under a cathedral skylight, fitness equipment, personal trainers,

massage therapists, steam room, and sauna. The beauty salon is also very popular.

Residents as well as guests are known to linger in the Rittenhouse's restaurants, which overlook the picturesque park in Rittenhouse Square. TreeTops Restaurant is open for three meals a day. Breakfast and lunchtime are treats as light streams in from the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the square. A tiered seating arrangement affords commanding views of the block even for those in back.

If a place where you can drop peanut shells on the floor suits your mood, you can order a couple of drinks or a light meal in the Boathouse Row Bar and Grill. Dark woods, a hand-painted mural of Philadelphia's Boathouse Row, and memorabilia and photographs featuring Olympic rower Jack Kelly, whose scull hangs from the ceiling, complete the old-time boathouse atmosphere.

As you might expect, the service at the restaurants and the bar is as important as the cuisine. The staff always appears willing to go out of its way to make you comfortable and happy. It doesn't go unnoticed, especially to a general manager such as Benton, whose philosophy is to empower the hotel's staff—from the wait staff to the chambermaids to the concierge—so that they can make both the little and the big decisions that daily affect the guests' happiness. This means that unusual requests from the guests can often be met without convening a committee or beeping a manager. And that, says Benton, keeps the hotel's guests happy, keeps them coming back, and keeps the hotel's staff feeling involved in the decision-making process. As a result, staff members perform their duties as if they have personal stakes in the business.

That kind of service endears itself to business travelers, a group the Rittenhouse regards as highly as its more celebrated guests. To meet business needs, the hotel boasts 8,000 square feet of banquet and meeting space and a business center that offers secretarial services in addition to the usual copying and faxing. Other amenities include complimentary shoe shines, safe-deposit boxes, and courtesy limousine service.

The Rittenhouse's location also makes it attractive to both business and luxury travelers. It is located a couple of blocks from the city's financial center

but in a vibrant residential neighborhood that is a short safe walk from upscale shops and restaurants such as Le Bec-Fin. Philadelphia's Antique Row is also nearby. If you've got about a half-hour, you can even hoof it crosstown to Independence Park or the Delaware River waterfront.

The Rittenhouse's elegantly contemporary atmosphere, its spacious accommodations, excellent dining, and attractive location certainly give its general manager plenty to talk about, but as he gingerly puts down his fork at the completion of lunch, the discussion about service continues. He has stories about his staff changing the room number for a superstitious guest and removing a door plate reading "Presidential Suite" for a modest businessman. The stories go on and on, and you can be sure that Benton will continue to collect these anecdotes. We expect they will get even better.

Room rates range from \$190 (weekends) to \$315 for a standard room; \$475 to \$500 for a one bedroom suite; and \$1,200 for the Presidential Suite. The long-term Luxury Suites with kitchens range from \$6,000 to \$11,500 per month and \$550.00 to \$800.00 per night.

For more information, contact The Rittenhouse Hotel, 210 West Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia PA 19103; telephone (215)546-9000, fax (215) 732-3364.

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