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PORTLAND POWERS UP

Oregon's eccentric enclave is expanding its group offerings

BY MARIA LENHART

Just when you think you know Portland, a place where the offbeat and the quirky are points of pride, it has the power to surprise. Tucked into the green heart of the Pacific Northwest, this city keeps on reinventing itself with visitor experiences that can rival or surpass those in more high-profile meeting destinations.

"We don't have anything iconic here like the Space Needle or Golden Gate Bridge, but what we do have is a mentality of fasters, makers and adventurers that keeps evolving all the time," said James Jessie, senior vice president of convention sales for Travel Portland. "What we're doing now, with all the new hotels and restaurants in

the downtown center, is further building on the Portland brand that draws people here."

I discovered this a few months ago, heading up to Portland to see what has happened to the city in the decade since I had been there last. My first impression, as I boarded the MAX Light Rail train that whisked me from the airport terminal to



HILTON PORTLAND DOWNTOWN



JACKRABBIT, THE DUNIWAY PORTLAND

within a block of my downtown hotel for a nominal fare, is that this is a city where efficiency co-exists with its free-thinking side.

Arriving at the Hilton Portland Downtown, the city's largest hotel and newly emerged from a property-wide makeover, I got my first surprise. My accommodations were actually across the street at The Duniway Portland, the Hilton's former executive tower reborn as a 327-room boutique property. Named for Abigail Scott Duniway, an early 20th century Portland journalist and women's rights advocate, the stylish hotel combines luxurious touches like Waldorf Astoria beds and Vittoria Coffee espresso machines with a vibe that is pure Portland.

There's a convivial lobby with bleached woods, colorful leather sofas, tables with board games, shelves of books curated by Powell's Books, a custom-designed screen of blackened steel and a bar serving local craft beers and fair-trade coffee. There's a bamboo-lined roof deck, available for events, where guests can text their menu choices to the kitchen. In-room amenity packages feature local treats such as Portlandia popcorn, Rain City Crunch granola, Dogwood D.L. Franklin vodka and Rose City Bitters. The hotel is also home to Jackrabbit, a restaurant operated by celebrity chef Chris Cosentino, a *Top Chef Masters* winner, which features a Pacific Northwest raw bar, house-cured meats and a seasonal menu. Available for buyouts, the restaurant offers imaginative private dining spaces such as the Rabbit Hole, a tucked-away space with a hidden door.

"The Duniway has a totally different feel than the Hilton Portland, which is more of your traditional convention hotel, but also a new choice for our meetings customers," said Stephen Cassell, marketing manager for both properties. "You can use the Duniway for upscale meetings for 60 or less or, in the case of larger meetings, give attendees the option of upgrading from the Hilton."

At the same time, the Hilton Portland has taken on a new persona of its own,

especially with an overhaul of the meeting space that included the addition of a light-filled, 5,500-square-foot ballroom, bringing its total to 60,000 square feet. There's also a redesigned open-concept lobby with long communal tables resembling old-growth trees that adjoins a new gastro-pub called Hop City Tavern.

"We wanted the lobby to become more of a space for networking, not just a place to check in," Cassell said.

Turning a Corner

The Hilton/Duniway transformation is only part of what is ramping up Portland's group appeal. The city is experiencing a boost in room inventory that encompasses a long-awaited convention center hotel as well as numerous smaller downtown properties.

"There's a real explosion of our hotel product that will keep building through 2020," Travel Portland's Jessie said. "We currently have 8,000 rooms in the city center, but that will grow to 10,000."

The most significant contribution will come from the 600-room, \$224 million **Hyatt Regency Portland at Oregon Convention Center** (www.oregoncc.org), a LEED-certified property slated to open in late 2019. The property is a significant milestone that gives the convention center, located across the river from downtown, its first nearby headquarters hotel.

While convention delegates can easily reach the convention center from downtown hotels via the MAX Light Rail, the addition of the Hyatt is a boon for citywide convention business in Portland, according to Jessie.

"This is a real turning point for us and we're already seeing an increase in convention bookings since last August when the hotel broke ground," he said. "The added inventory next to the center also makes a big difference in the size of groups we can attract. While 1,000 to 1,200 rooms on

peak nights is currently typical, this will take that up to 1,700 to 2,000 rooms."

More hotel growth is happening in the downtown area, with an influx of new "lifestyle" properties that fit right in with Portland's approach to distinctive style and cuisine. Among them is the 120-room **Hi-Lo Hotel** (www.hi-lo-hotel.com), which opened last year in the historic Oregon Pioneer Building and is part of Marriott's Autograph Collection. It features products from Oregon-based businesses like Pendleton Mills, A Yen for Chocolate, Smith Teamaker and Reverend Nat's Hard Cider. An artful blend of past and present, dining choices include Alto Baja, a restaurant serving Oaxacan cuisine, and Huber's, a Portland institution that has been serving turkey dinners since 1879.

Another newcomer is the stylish 205-room **Dossier Hotel** (www.dossierhotel.com), which opened last summer following the conversion of a former Westin property. Displaying art that includes a multimedia work by Tony Oursler and photographs by Slim Aarons, the hotel also features Opal, a restaurant and bar serving New American cuisine and signature cocktails.

The Porter Hotel (<http://curiocollection3.hilton.com>), part of Hilton's luxury Curio brand, opened this spring in the downtown Fountain District with 299 rooms, an indoor pool and full-service spa. Its four dining choices include Xport lounge, a rooftop deck with fire pits and views of the river and mountains.

Expected to open later this year in the new mixed-use Broadway Tower, the **Radisson RED** (www.radisson.com) will offer 180 guest rooms, a restaurant and conference space as well as tech features such as mobile app check-in. Also on tap for this year is **Canopy by Hilton Portland** (<http://canopy3.hilton.com>), a Pearl District property with 153 rooms and 2,800 square feet of event space. **m**



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