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JOSEPH MOREL

By Hillary Richard
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

At first glance, Fourth of July weekend in pandemic Newport wasn't too different. People crowded the streets, restaurant reservations were hard to come by, the beaches were packed. But 2020 is a layer cake of faux normalcy with intricate anxiety ribbons, so beneath the surface, things had changed. Signs around town requested everyone wear masks, restaurants asked for contact tracing information, indoor

'This hotel has only ever known a pandemic'

Hammetts Hotel opened in Newport in late June and it nearly sold out in its first week

businesses operated at reduced capacity. While most people embraced a new type of normal, one scenario gave everyone pause: a hotel opening downtown on Commercial Wharf.

To put it mildly, this is a strange time to open a new hotel.

Hammetts Hotel opened with a shrug on June 26. To everyone's surprise, the 84-room hotel was nearly sold out in its first week.

"I think people like the idea of being the first ones in a room in a brand-new hotel — especially right now," said Randi Milewski, the general manager. "So far it's been a good mix of staycationers and mostly New Englanders."

In many ways, the stars aligned for Hammetts, which broke ground in October 2018. The brand new building was almost finished by March 2020, when everything started to shut down around it. Rhode Island allowed construction to continue, so the crew worked through the spring on a staggered schedule, with meetings and inspections done over Zoom. Be-

hind the scenes, project managers panicked over the uncertain future of travel and hospitality. They ran projections on every scenario from the costs of operating at 20 percent to 30 percent capacity for several months to completely freezing the hotel until 2021. In the meantime, some of the custom furniture was significantly delayed — which allowed the hotel to redesign the seating plans in common areas to allow for social distancing. It wasn't until the end of May (when the hotel was originally slated to open) that they decided to just go for it and see what happens.

"It was a little white knuckle, a little bit of faith. We opened without a crystal ball as to how people were going to travel or if they'd even want to stay in hotels, and with the understanding that we might have to flex back down again," said Sarah Eustice, the CEO of Massachusetts-based Main Street Hospitality Group, Hammetts's operating partner.

From the start, Hammetts's brand of luxury was an independent one. As luck would have it, the functionality that was initially designed to offer travelers independence (like a self-check-in kiosk option and touchless room entry) now also offers them virus protection.

"Our definition of hospitality is not about 15 people running around trying to take your bags and fuss over you. It's about one great person really looking you in the eyes, smiling, and welcoming you," said Eustice.

Opening this summer gave Hammetts a chance to incorpo-

Before opening, Hammetts Hotel redesigned seating in common areas for social distancing. Below: The hotel's expansive outdoor space and private deck overlooks Newport Marina.



rate all kinds of pandemic protocols from day one. Currently, Hammetts staff members are masked and occasionally behind glass partitions. Prior to opening, they trained in the art of smiling with their eyes and using alternative methods of communicating hospitality, like their voices and body language. Hammetts partnered with Blue

Canary, a company that trains hotels in hospital-level cleaning methods and conducts regular check-ins. As part of their new procedures, housekeeping will be in the rooms for longer periods, using stronger disinfectants.

"This hotel has only ever known a pandemic," said Milewski, while standing on one of the permanent social distance markers on the lobby floor.

That's not to say that Hammetts isn't impressively chic. Providence-based Union Studio designed the property with a sleek, nautical modern motif. Hammetts has four suites (approximately 550 square feet each), two meeting rooms, and an art gallery with rotating exhibits. Local artists and photographers were enlisted to tell the story of Newport in unique ways through their works, which decorate the entire hotel. Even the now-omnipresent bottles of hand sanitizers got a design upgrade, housed in neutral, matching cases. ("We just spent \$30 million on a gorgeous hotel, we can come up with a solution that's not just Purell everywhere. It's like putting the orange juice bottle on the table and not pouring it into a glass," said Eustice, jokingly.)

The two-story building has a small footprint on the wharf, but the property includes an expansive outdoor space and private deck overlooking the Newport Marina. Giusto, a new restaurant helmed by Chef Kevin O'Donnell (a Rhode Island native, formerly of Boston's SRV), is scheduled to open in late August with an outdoor bar and large patio space. Giusto will focus on Italian cuisine with a Rhode Island twist.

As the surrounding Hammetts Wharf opens up its planned retail spaces and the pandemic continues past high season, the hotel will inevitably face challenges.

"If we have to shut down later in the year because of some kind of new mandate, we're

now much more experienced, and we can do what needs to be done,” said Eustice. “It’s been empowering for our team, helping people to understand that we have to be incredibly serious about this but we don’t have to be scared all the time.”

Hammetts is one of three new hotels opening in Newport this summer. The 197-room Wayfinder Hotel (reconstructed from the former Mainstay Hotel) opened in early June. The six-story, 57-room Brenton Hotel also plans to open later this season.

Hillary Richard can be reached at hillaryrichard@outlook.com.