

Keswick rebuilds its image

New homes top renovation plans

By David Dadurka
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The first thing Michael Pownall asked himself when he took over as general manager of Keswick Estate more than a year ago was why Keswick hadn't been a tremendous success from day one.

"The estate has different lives—as a hotel, a club and as a home—and that confuses people," Pownall said. "The previous owners really produced a product that should appeal to local people, but they didn't win over the community or decide what role Keswick would play locally."

Pownall is hoping to alter the community's past perceptions of Keswick by making improvements to the property and starting a residential real estate program.

Since it was built, Keswick has weathered some difficulty periods. The estate and club have changed several times in its 90-year history.

"The previous owner sold the club locally, but not the hotel," he said.

Pownall, who spent the previous five years managing Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town, South Africa, added that the real estate development in the past had been a half-hearted attempt to make it happen."

"The three businesses are all intertwined," Pownall said. "The real estate, the club and the hotel all help each other."

Orient-Express Hotels, which purchased Keswick in 1999 for \$13.5 million, already has spent about \$500,000 on renovations to the interior of the hotel and spent just over \$1 million on a new pool between the hotel and the club.

Orient-Express, founded in 1976, owns 30 upscale hotels, including sites in Venice and South Africa; four restaurants; six tourist trains; and a river cruise-ship.

The company's 2001 net earnings were \$29.9 million, down 25 percent from \$40 million in 2000.

Orient-Express, like many companies in the travel industry, suffered a decline as a result of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, according to Securities and Exchange records.

Pownall said that Keswick suffered from corporate groups cutting back on travel, but saw a boost in individual leisure travel.

He said the hotel's occupancy rate was down by a "few points," hovering around the low 60 percent range.

For Randy Rinehart, a 30-year veteran of the construction industry, working alongside his local competitors for Keswick's residential real estate development was out of the ordinary.

"I've been in the industry for a long time and have never done anything like this," said Rinehart, president of Rinehart Homes. "It's not something that happens often in the industry, but it's been good to share with other professionals. It really helps to foment a higher level of thinking."

That higher level of thinking was just what Cary Brent, director of estate development of Keswick Estate, had in mind when he first brought in Rinehart and two other local builders to develop home sites on the lush 600-acre estate in January.

"We got excited working with the builders because they came in and criticized each other's projects without getting bent out of shape," Brent said.

Keswick Estate has 120 home sites to develop, he said. Thirty-five homes will be built in the first phase of the project.

Brent met with the three custom home builders, Rinehart, Jack Stoner, partner with Alexander/Nicholson Inc., and Bruce Gordon, president of Shelter Associates, six months ago to discuss Keswick's plans.

"Before Cary and Michael [Pownall] were there, there wasn't a very cohesive approach to building," Stoner said. "Cary sees the homes as a lifestyle instead of just a financial gain."

But that lifestyle will cost homebuyers at the estate around \$1.2 million, Brent said, adding that homebuyers get a family membership to the estate's 18-hole Arnold Palmer golf course.

Unique designs

Each builder has started by designing a house for the initial phase of development, and Brent said as homebuyers look at Keswick, he would recommend the three builders to potential buyers first because of their partnership.

"We want every house in Keswick to be unique," he said.

Alexander/Nicholson's first house will be a two-story, arts-and-crafts-style home, which Stone said would be started in two weeks. "It's very traditional," he said. "It will use a lot of wood and stone on the interior, and will have a stucco exterior."

Rinehart said he chose to build his first home in Keswick using the "universal design" concept. "In essence, a person will be able to age in place," he said, explaining that the house has features that will be applicable to people at different stages in life. "There are wider doorways, so if the homeowner has a wheelchair they can get in easier," he said.

Gordon's company, Shelter Associates, is building a two-story home resembling the Tuscan architecture of Keswick Hall.

The house is designed to have a stucco exterior and an Italianate tile roof, he said.

"Not only has it been pleasurable to work with this group on design, but quality is always emphasized," Gordon said. "There is never talk of gimmicks."

Golf course expansion

Pownall said that Keswick also plans to expand its golf course and add golf paths.

"The work on the golf cart paths has taken a while to sink in," Pownall said. "I thought, is it really a priority? But when you have to cancel outings because it rained the night before, and carts would damage the course, you realize that you are losing money and annoying people."

Cary Brent, director of real estate development at Keswick, said there are also plans under way to expand the club next year.

By the time Keswick completes these projects, the company will have invested an additional \$4.5 million to \$5 million, Pownall said.

Besides physical improvements, Pownall wants to change local consumers' misconceptions about the 48-room luxury hotel.

He believes that because the past the club was marketed locally, but not the hotel, some residents believe they can't dine or stay at Keswick Hall.

"The misconception I observe the most is about what things cost," he said. "I've worked at British five-star hotels for most of my life and for years my mother believed you had to pay to just go through the door."