

Home suite home - Extended-stay hotels flourishing in area

By Kim Horner

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For nine months, Deritte Fernandez came home from work each night to a hotel. Instead of greeting his wife, Chantell, in person, he called her at their house in San Diego. And to avoid staring at the hotel wall, he often turned to his neighbors at the Residence Inn by Marriott for dinner or basketball games.

The San Diego resident spent so much time in Dallas on business this year, he almost forgot which city was home.

"When people would ask me where I live, I would actually say Dallas a lot," said Mr. Fernandez, a corporate instructor for Honeywell Inc. who stayed at the Dallas hotel from January through September. "When you're there nine months, you almost get settled in without getting settled in."

Mr. Fernandez didn't live in Dallas long enough to lease an apartment. Instead, he joined a large population of temporary residents who live in the fast-growing number of extended-stay hotels throughout the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Dozens of apartment-style hotels have sprouted in recent years, the number exploding to more than 12,000 rooms. Most hotel guests are business travelers who stay for weeks or months for training, consulting or other work.

They leave home for long periods, often to a new city where they don't know anyone, and make hotels their home away from home.

'A neighborhood feel'

Like many of his hotel neighbors, Mr. Fernandez plans to travel for his job for several more years. His wife, a Marine Corps officer, also does a lot of traveling.

"It's tough to be away from family a lot," said Mr. Fernandez, who recently checked out of the Residence Inn at Dallas Market Center but plans to return next year.

When he came to the hotel, he realized he wasn't alone.

On a recent evening, more than a dozen guests sat chatting at tables during the hotel's nightly social hour. Many knew each other and hotel staff members on a first-name basis. After work, people at the hotel often meet for the hotel buffet of appetizers and make plans to go to dinner, watch TV by the fireplace or hang out.

"It's like a little community," Mr. Fernandez said. "You're stuck by yourself in a hotel, but you meet a lot of people who do the same thing you do."

Like many apartment complexes, the Residence Inn has tennis and basketball courts, grills, a swimming pool and laundry facilities.

"We have kind of a neighborhood feel," said Laurette Guess, general manager at the Residence Inn at Dallas Market Center. "We try very hard to make it feel like home more than a hotel."

There are the Southwestern Bell employees who come for six-week training sessions. State Fair vendors who make a three-week run. A team of auditors stayed for one year.

"I think they really felt it was home," Ms. Guess said of the auditors.

Extended-stay hotel boom

The strong economy, especially in the high-tech industry, has created a growing population of mobile workers, according to a study by the Highland Group Hotel Investment Advisors Inc. in Atlanta.

That growth has fueled a boom in extended-stay hotels, which look more like small, furnished apartments, some with separate kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms. The hotels cost less than many full-service hotels because they have less-frequent maid service and other amenities.

The number of extended-stay hotel rooms nationwide quadrupled in the last five years, according to the Highland Group.

"The need for them is created by growth and change in the economy," said Peggy Berg, president of the Highland Group. "People are venturing out to improve their employment, and companies are investing in training people."

The hotels have found strong markets in cities with rapid growth and job opportunities, especially in areas with high-tech industries and low development costs such as Dallas, Atlanta and Chicago, she said.

More and more employees in computer, electronics and other businesses are traveling for longer periods of time, said Monique J. Damiano, spokeswoman for Extended Stay America Inc. The Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based chain has opened 10 hotels in the Dallas area in the last three years.

"We're building as aggressively as we are because of the demand," she said.

But the growth has slowed locally because of overbuilding, said hotel analyst John Keeling, senior vice president of PKF Consulting Inc. in Houston, which also has studied the market. The industry's phenomenal growth in the last few years has led to increasing competition and decreasing occupancy, he added.

More than 12 million people visited Dallas in 1999, 40 percent of them on business, according to the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau. The agency does not keep tabs on the number of business travelers who stay for extended periods.

Survival secrets

Long-term hotel guests say the secret to their survival is to make themselves at home.

Mr. Fernandez brought his mountain bike, CDs - even his cocker spaniel for 31/2 months of his stay.

"To keep any resemblance of your life you have to do certain things," he said. "I had made this place so much like home."

San Antonio resident Dawn Patterson said she cried every night during the first week of her two-month training in Dallas. She missed her fiance, Alex Carter, his three sons and the petting-zoo business she has back home.

But the Southwestern Bell Yellow Pages employee adjusted. Ms. Patterson started to enjoy having someone to do her grocery shopping, dry cleaning and cook her breakfast. One recent evening, she chatted with hotel staff members about her plans to take the hotel's shuttle to a shopping center.

"It's just like a family. You get to know everybody on a first- name basis," said Ms. Patterson who came with three co-workers from San Antonio.

They got along so well, she said, the hotel staff took the Southwestern Bell group bowling before it left town.

Ms. Patterson said she never expected to enjoy her business trip so much.

"But I can't wait to get home," Ms. Patterson said. "I hate to leave, but I want to get home with my family."

After five months at Extended-Stay America's StudioPLUS hotel in Farmers Branch, Cyndi Altizeris excited about moving to a house this weekend. Her husband, Gary, and sons, Jon, 24, and Chris, 19, were on their way as part of the family's move from Chicago to Dallas.

Mrs. Altizer relocated to Dallas this summer for her job as vice president of operations at REALTEC mortgage in Dallas. She has been home once, and Mr. Altizer has visited her a couple of times. Still, it has been difficult.

"I miss them," she said.

Ms. Altizer couldn't go home for Thanksgiving, so she bought dinner and spent the day at her hotel. Instead of being at her family's gathering that day, she spent two hours on the phone with relatives.

As much as she misses Chicago, Ms. Altizer had a strange sensation of being a visitor last time she visited.

"This is my home," she said of her hotel. "For now, anyway."Hotel facts.