

Earth-friendly energy systems can make hoteliers a lot of green // **BY POONAM KHANNA**

LOBBY GROUP:

Eco-friendly doesn't mean bland at Alt Hotels, a new concept by Quebec's Groupe Germain. Thanks to savings from its energy-efficient architecture, the brand's no frills-chic esthetic will still feature "captivating space where service, design and comfort are key."

As environmental issues continue to push into the mainstream, hoteliers are discovering going green can be good for the planet and for business. Properties old and new are implementing energy-efficiency measures to reduce waste and lower costs, and these investments are paying off. Greening your hotel may even help attract visitors who are eager to support environmentally conscious businesses.

When Greg Salloum, owner of Kelowna, B.C.'s 154-room Best Western Inn, started at the hotel, he was astounded by the wastefulness of hotel operations. Before going green was the in-thing to do, Salloum wanted to reduce waste and become more energy efficient. He also thought decreasing wastefulness could help the hotel lower its costs. For starters, more than 15 years ago, long before it became standard hotel practice, he introduced blue boxes into every room. "Back in 1990, it was a novel idea," he says. The next year, he refit-



ALT LINES:
The first Alt opens in Montreal's new Quartier DIX30 in September 2007.

ted the whole facility with energy-efficient light bulbs, once again, well ahead of his competitors.

Then in 1997, Salloum started investigating ways to decrease the cost of heating water. "We're in kind of a sunbelt in Kelowna, so it seemed silly to me to be using a lot of energy to heat the water when the sun is so bright," he says. He also hoped to lessen his hotel's contribution to polluting the environment.

Salloum began searching for a firm that could retrofit the hotel's water heating system to take advantage of solar energy, finally locating a contactor who used the power of the sun to heat swimming pools. His hotel now has 102 hot water solar panels on its roof, and heating pumps that provide guest rooms and the laundry facilities with a virtually endless supply of hot water. The system also saves 90 tons of greenhouse gases from being emitted into the atmosphere each year, since the hotel's natural gas-burning hot water tanks work a lot less.

As for start-up costs, the hotel spent \$258,000 on the panels and a pair of five-ton heat pumps, and \$80,000 on a 50-ton water-to-water heat pump and re-piping the system. The solar panels and 6,000-litre solar storage tank can meet up to 90 per cent of the hotel's hot water needs in the summer, and about 60 per cent in the winter, also supplying a 90,000-litre swimming pool and two hot tubs. That's translated into savings on the hotel's natural gas bill to the tune of \$25,000 a year. "We are currently

working with a controls company to fine-tune the system to receive greater efficiencies and likely shorten the pay-back times," Salloum says. "However our current estimate of the combined payback is seven years, so in 2010 it will all be paid for. It's a savings that drops to our bottom line in terms of the value of the building." Another bonus: at a capitalization rate of 10 per cent, it means the hotel is adding a value of \$250,000 to the building.

As another test, Salloum once compared the cost savings on a per person, per day basis for July, August and September, the busiest months of the year. The hotel spent \$0.56 per person per day in 2000 for natural gas — in 2005, the hotel spent only \$0.28 for the same three months (although that's not adjusted for inflation).

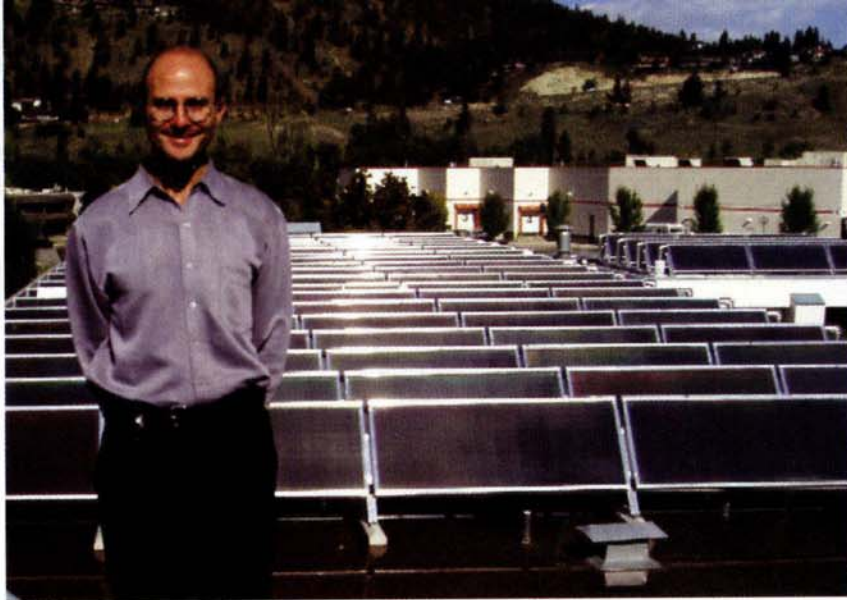
Salloum was also bothered by the wasteful amount of hot air being vented outside by the hotel's dryers. So the hotel added a heat exchanger off the natural gas dryer vents in the laundry room. Hot air which would have been vented outside is now used to preheat

water for the washing machines. "It's simple and effective," Salloum says. "You know the old adage, 'A penny saved is a penny earned.' I take it to an extreme."

In an effort to curb wastefulness, Salloum also installed low-flow showerheads in the guest rooms, but he insists they don't compromise the guest's comfort. "I tested out a dozen different shower heads because there's nothing worse than going to a hotel and getting a wimpy shower. I picked the one I wanted at home." The one he picked uses 2.5 gallons of water per minute, compared to regular flow heads which use three to four gallons per minute.

In February 2007, the Ottawa-based Hotel Association of Canada recognized Salloum's efforts, awarding him its Energy & Environment Award for developing "environmental management practices that improve everyday operations and the bottom line, while maintaining quality service and meeting guest expectations." Speaking of guests, they have also responded favourably. Salloum says they e-mail the hotel, commenting on its energy efficiency measures and asking to support its leadership by staying there.

And the facility will continue its efforts to become more energy efficient. Salloum is planning to add a geothermal component to his water heating system so he can save the excess energy the solar panels produce in the summer. He's also looking into electricity-generating solar panels to reduce the load on the hotel's existing system, but he's not sure the technology is there yet, since



SUN KING:

Owner Greg Salloum in front of the 102 solar panels he installed on his Kelowna, B.C., Best Western. The system supplies up to 90 per cent of the hotel's hot water — including the pool — and will pay for itself after just seven years.

the hotel needs to realize a payback from its investment in a reasonable amount of time — preferably 10 years.

Quebec City's rapidly expanding Groupe Germain Inc., known for its half-dozen boutique properties in Central Canada, recently announced a new brand of "cheap-chic" hotels, dubbed "Alt," to be built from the ground up. Rooms at Alt properties will go for \$129 per night, and incorporating energy efficiency is one of the ways the hotel will be able to offer this, says Hugo Germain, co-president of the family-owned company.

The hotel will be built with pre-fabricated rooms and powered by geothermal energy for both heating and air conditioning. The first property, scheduled to open in September 2007 in Montreal, will have 36 wells outside the building with pumps pushing water and glycol through two pipes. Since the ground remains at a con-

stant temperature of 10°C, when the water stays deep in the ground, it doesn't have to be heated as much as if it ran closer to the surface (which is the usual practice). So to keep the hotel at 21°C in the winter, the water will only have to be heated 11°C. In the summer, the water will always be a cool-as-a-cucumber 10°C, meaning the only energy used will be for the circulation pumps. Germain estimates this will save the hotel 45 per cent on energy costs, including Hydro Quebec subsidies designed to encourage such systems.

The hotel will also manage all of the lights in guest rooms with a centrally controlled switch. When guests enter the room, they will use their key card to turn on lights (energy efficient, of course), and when they leave, they

have to take the card with them, which will turn off all of the lights in 10 to 15 minutes. Alt will use a similar concept in stairwells, where lights will remain off unless someone opens a door. Toilets at the hotel will even have two flush options, one using three litres of water and a second power-flush using six litres, allowing the hotel to save on water consumption. "That's a lot of flushes in a hotel," Germain says.

As with the Best Western in Kelowna, these plans have piqued the interest of hotel fans enthusiastic about its green strategy. "People are talking about it in blogs. We're fortunate they found out we're using those measures," Germain says. So while building and retrofitting for energy efficiency may mean an upfront investment, forward-thinking hoteliers are clearly finding a way for green projects to keep their bottom line in the black. ♦

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