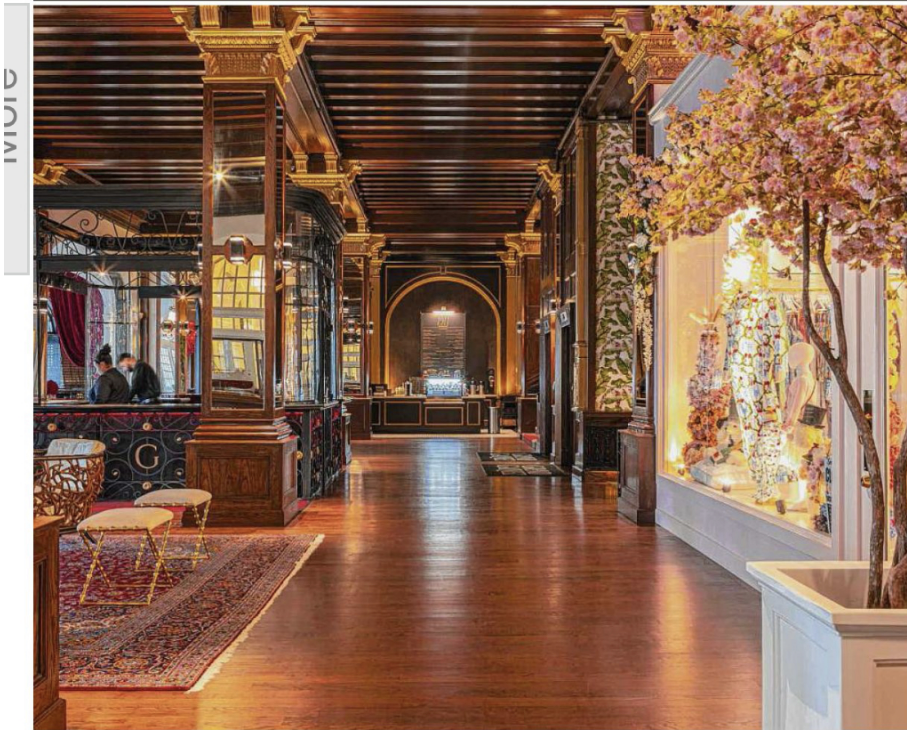

★
STAR

HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM • TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2023 • SECTION D



The lobby in the newly renovated Grand Galvez in Galveston features grand architectural style.

Grand Galvez/Seawall Hospitality LLC photos

Grand Galvez restored to its former glory

Iconic Galveston hotel features a pink exterior and a colorful, luxurious interior

By **Diane Cowen**
STAFF WRITER

Some 48 glittering Baccarat crystal chandeliers, floors covered in rich wood, marble or bold carpets, and fabric-lined walls are part of the colorful new tradition at one of Galveston's iconic landmarks, the historic Grand Galvez on the island's seawall. After a year and a half of renovations that began with a furor over pink exterior paint samples as new owners Mark and Lorenda Wyant of Dallas-based Seawall Hospitality were figuring out what color to paint the 112-year-old hotel, work is winding down. Public spaces are finished and remaining rooms are expected to be finished by May. The hotel's décor is now infused with color and pattern, as well as durable materials that look luxurious. Inspired by interior designers of another era, the Wyants set out



The pink paint on the hotel's exterior stirred debate when it was revealed.

to reinvent the Galvez in the colorful, maximalist style of places such as the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., and the Beverly Hills Hotel in Beverly Hills, Calif.

"They had pitchforks and torches out for me," Mark Wyant said, joking about the initial reaction to changing the hotel's exterior from white to pink. "It's been a 180-degree turn around. Now I can't find one person who doesn't like it."

The Wyants bought the hotel, then known as the Hotel Galvez, in May 2021, and by the fall of that year, work was under way to bring back the hotel's best original features and spruce up every guest room and gut their bathrooms.

The hotel opened in 1911 when island businessmen pooled their funds to build a hotel that would tell the rest of the country that the island had recovered from the Great

Galvez continues on D6

GALVEZ

From page D1

Storm of 1900 — the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history — that destroyed 7,000 buildings and killed 8,000 people. Throughout the years, the hotel has had a variety of owners, including the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II and famed heart surgeon Dr. Denton Cooley, who bought it in 1978.

George P. Mitchell — the late Galveston native and philanthropist best known for developing The Woodlands and for pioneering the shale gas extraction method known as fracking — bought it in 1993, owning both the Galvez and the Tremont House in his Mitchell Historic Properties.

In January 2020, it was reported that both the Galvez and the Tremont House were being sold to SRH Hospitality Holdings, but that deal stalled in the pandemic. Ultimately, SRH bought the Tremont House, which dates back to 1865, and the Wyants stepped in to buy the Galvez.

The Grand Galvez's renovations weren't just about freshening things up. The Wyants researched the history of the place and looked at old photos and decided to uncover original millwork and plaster work that had been covered up by layers of renovations through the years. They wanted to restore the hotel — to some degree — to its former glory.

Two of their earliest decisions were to rename it the Grand Galvez and to paint it pink, a more resort-like color.

Just inside the hotel's front door, guests are now greeted by a tile mosaic declaring the hotel the "Queen of the South." It was designed by Lorenda Wyant and Dallas-based artist Julie Richey and constructed in Italy.

The new check-in desk, surrounded by ornate wrought iron, resembles a train station ticket counter from long ago. Behind it is a main stairwell now restored to what it used to look like, with beautiful wood paneling and red carpet. An old, original railing, the last left in the building, was removed and adapted to make it a few inches higher and adhere to city code. At the top of the landing is an old portrait of Bernardo de Galvez, a gift to Cooley when he hosted his own grand opening years ago.

Galvez, an 18th-century Spanish military leader, was colonial governor of Louisiana and helped the Colonists during the Revolutionary War. Both Galveston and Galvez, La., are named after him.



Peacock Alley stands out in the newly renovated Grand Galvez in Galveston.

Grand Galvez/Seawall Hospitality LLC photos



The lobby staircase was restored to look like it originally did when the hotel first opened.



The East Loggia features a black and white marble floor and grand crystal chandeliers.



The hotel's spa has a more modern feel, designed to put guests at ease.



Two oversized Baccarat red crystal chandeliers cast a sexy glow on the Founders Bar.

When the Galvez opened in 1911, Victorian and Edwardian styles were in vogue. The Wyants are aiming for an era slightly later, the 1920s jazz era, when styles were a little more relaxed and a lot more fun.

The Wyants restored what once was called "Peacock Alley," a promenade for visitors wearing their finest clothes on the way to dinner or a concert. Now, it's a wide hall lined with black and white marble tile and huge, bell-shaped light fixtures with crystal chandeliers tucked inside. From this space, you'll find the new Lolo



The Music Hall is set up for corporate meetings in the newly renovated Grand Galvez.

Boutique, which carries resort clothing such as Lilly Pulitzer and the same Niven Morgan bath products that overnight

guests have in their suites. What used to be the West Loggia — an area with casual seating in a

broad hallway-like space — is now the Founders Bar, a place likely to be filled with thirsty vacationers or locals looking for a chic spot for an evening cocktail. The bar honors the men who pooled their money to build the hotel, and their portraits are mounted on the front of the bar.

Walls are covered in Venetian plaster, which lends a luxurious finish but also serves another role. The calcium-based graphene material that the Wyants found is virtually waterproof, so if another hurricane floods the hotel, the walls should be able to be washed down without

being ruined.

Two oversized Baccarat red crystal chandeliers cast a sexy glow in the bar, and furniture is finished in natural fibers, such as cane and jute, deep red velvet or a playful cheetah print. A nook at the far end of the bar has rich paneled walls and an L-shaped, red velvet banquette.

At the other end, the East Loggia is decorated similarly, with the black and white marble floor, but has clear crystal chandeliers and wall sconces with red accents. Here, visitors are encouraged to relax in white wicker chairs that line the hall.

The 224 guest rooms, with all new furnishings and décor, are meant to meet the standards the Wyants expect when they travel.

"For 22 years, I was an (American Airlines) pilot, so I've stayed in plenty of hotels," Mark Wyant said. "I am of the opinion that a hotel room needs four things: to be scrupulously clean, to have a nice TV with plenty of channels, a great shower experience and a comfortable bed."

Floors with guest rooms have hallway walls lined in a tropical print, and the rooms are decorated in chinoiserie style, with faux bamboo embellishments — furnishings primarily made in the U.S. to avoid some supply chain issues. The bathrooms remain their same size but will feel more open to guests since bulky bathtubs were removed in favor of larger showers.

The Wyants have visited Galveston often since buying the Galvez, and on a recent stay, they used Room 501, the most talked-about room in the hotel. It's believed to be haunted by a woman named Audra, who allegedly hanged herself in her bathroom after learning that her merchant marine husband had died in a storm at sea.

In fact, hotel records show that decades ago, a woman died of a broken neck in the hotel, but there are no details about the death.

Another ghost story often told, Wyant said, is that of children, all dressed in white, laughing and playing in the hotel's hallways. In real life, a nun and a group of children from the city's orphanage drowned in the 1900 storm, and their bodies allegedly were found in the sand on the land where the hotel now stands.

Enough people ask for Room 501 and repeat ghost stories that the hotel offers a monthly ghost tour — an event held more often during high season and closer to Halloween.

diane.covven@chron.com