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[Home](#) / [business](#) / [local](#) /

Five area hotels receive coveted AAA awards

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When it comes to winning diamonds, even shampoo can make a difference.

At the Berkeley Hotel in downtown Richmond, general manager Denny Pierce says the hotel uses Gilchrist & Soames, an English brand of high-end shampoos and soaps.

The quality and presentation of the soaps and shampoos in a guest room is just one of the hundreds of small touches that can help earn a hotel a four- or five-diamond rating from AAA, the auto club that every year rates more than 32,000 lodgings and 28,000 restaurants.

"It's about attention to details," Pierce said.

Less than 4 percent of the properties evaluated by AAA inspectors receive four- or five-diamond awards.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of little components," that go into the ratings, said Feliks Schwartz, general manager of the Westin Richmond Hotel in Henrico County.

The Westin, The Berkeley and other three other hotels in central Virginia received the coveted four- and five-diamond ratings this year.

One area restaurant — Lemaire Restaurant at The Jefferson Hotel — also received a four-diamond rating. It had earned

a five-diamond award from AAA for a decade, but the restaurant didn't participate in the ratings in 2007 or 2008 because it was planning a renovation and subsequently closed for six months. It reopened in July 2009.

The hotels and restaurants will be honored today at a luncheon at The Westin Richmond.

AAA has a 41-page book of guidelines listing in detail all of the qualities its inspectors look for when they stay at a hotel. They range from the quality of the chairs to whether the front desk answers the phone in fewer than three rings and addresses the guest by name.

The ratings guidelines include many elements of a hotel's architecture and furnishings, but in the end, good looks alone won't get you the top ratings, local hotel managers said. It's more about service, they said.

"You really need to be able to provide exceptional service and anticipate guest needs," said Joseph Longo, managing director of The Jefferson Hotel in downtown Richmond, which received AAA's five-diamond award for the 18th consecutive year.

"You also have to do that with a very sincere, friendly, welcoming attitude," he said.

All of the hotel managers mentioned "Southern hospitality" when describing what they strive to provide.

The Berkeley Hotel received a four-diamond rating for the 22nd year.

Other four-diamonds include the Westin Richmond, the Wyndham Virginia Crossings Hotel and Conference Center and The Hilton Richmond Hotel and Spa at Short Pump, which received a four-diamond in its first year in operation.

"We went into the project planning for a four-diamond rating," said Neil Amin, chief executive officer of Chester-based Shamin Hotels, which developed the Short Pump Hilton. "Every step of the way, we exceeded Hilton's standards."

In Virginia, The Inn at Little Washington and its dining room each received five-diamonds.

Twenty-two hotels in Virginia, including the four in the Richmond area, received the four-diamond award.

Eleven restaurants in Virginia earned four-diamond awards.

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