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Viscount now part of Ramada hotel chain

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Posted: **03/16/2012 1:00 AM** | Comments: **0 (including replies)**g



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Before the Viscount Gort joined the Ramada chain, it underwent a major makeover.

WINNIPEG'S Viscount Gort Hotel is joining a big-name international chain after decades as an independent operator.

The Portage Avenue hotel's owner, Winnipeg businessman Philip Kives, confirmed Thursday the hotel is

joining the Ramada Inn chain and changing its name to The Ramada Viscount Gort.

Although the new signs haven't gone up yet -- Kives said that will happen within the next month -- Ramada is already listing the Viscount Gort on its corporate website (www.ramada.com). It's the only Ramada hotel in the city.

The Viscount Gort paved the way for a rebranding when the 53-year-old facility underwent an \$11-million expansion and upgrade in 2009 and 2010.

The project included adding 9,000 square feet of new banquet space -- it can now accommodate gatherings of up to 600 people -- additional parking spaces and a complete renovation of all 135 guest rooms as well as the lobby area, restaurant and lounge.

Kives said he didn't upgrade the hotel so it could join a major chain. Rather, he did it for competitive reasons.

"I just thought there are a lot of new hotel rooms that are being built right now... and we had to do something."

Manitoba's hotel industry has been undergoing its biggest growth spurt in more than a decade during the last couple of years, with more than a dozen inns built or redeveloped. That includes six in the airport/Polo Park area alone, which adds 750 rooms to the city's inventory.

Kives agreed there are benefits to being part of an international chain due to the brand recognition it provides. Not only does that help the hotel in its own marketing efforts, but it now has the Ramada chain sending customers its way.

"We were hoping to get a lot of bookings from them, and we're already getting quite a few... without even doing anything yet."

He said adding more banquet space has paid big dividends.

"Our bookings are very strong. We've only got two weekends left open for this year. Otherwise, we're full."

Kives said he likes the hotel's location because it's only a couple of blocks from Polo Park Shopping Centre and a 10-minute drive from downtown and the airport. And it's only a 15-minute drive from the new IKEA retail development under construction in southwest Winnipeg.

"I think we'll benefit lots from that," he said.

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