Shrek and other DreamWorks characters coming to Gaylord hotels

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Shrek and his pals are about to make themselves at home in one of Central Florida's biggest hotels.

Gaylord Entertainment announced a deal Wednesday with DreamWorks Animation to bring the studio's characters to Gaylord hotels across the country, including the Gaylord Palms Hotel & Convention Center in Kissimmee.

The partnership gives Gaylord access to DreamWorks' stable of cartoon characters, including those in movies such as "Shrek," "Kung Fu Panda" and "Madagascar." In Central Florida, the arrangement could help the company compete with local theme-park hotels by offering amenities such as "character breakfasts" and themed entertainment.

"We have been looking for a significant way to expand our leisure offerings for some time, and this program with DreamWorks Animation will allow us to offer unique experiences that will enthrall our customers," said Colin Reed, chairman and chief executive officer of Nashville-based Gaylord Entertainment.

DreamWorks' Shrek, the green ogre who finds true love in a four-part movie series, is already the star of Shrek 4-D, a motion/simulator-ride at Universal Orlando. But Universal gave up the rights to expand its use of Shrek and other DreamWorks' stars in 2006.

Last year, DreamWorks signed a licensing deal with Royal Caribbean International. The cruise line now features the studio's characters on four of its ships.

For Gaylord, which focuses intensely on the meetings-and-convention market, the addition of Shrek and his pals makes for an interesting mix. Company executives say they aren't abandoning their business-travel model but are hoping the movie characters will boost their hotels' leisure-oriented occupancy and revenue during those times of year when group business is slow.

"The goal for us is to fill our hotels 100 percent, year-round," Reed said. "The reality, though, is groups don't want to travel in the summertime, and they don't want to travel during the [December] holiday period."
Gaylord is still in the process of figuring out the "breadth of the [DreamWorks] experience" during the hotels' primary business-travel months versus the more leisure-oriented periods, Reed said.

Navigating those waters could be a challenge, according to Michael Terry, a professor of lodging and restaurant management in the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

"When you think of them [Gaylord], you think of the meetings market," Terry said. "There's a mixed message. … I really don't know how they're going to integrate this."

Gaylord said it has no plans to offer themed hotel rooms, a revenue source embraced by Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando in recent years. Disney announced just this week plans for more than 500 princess-themed hotel rooms, in addition to its relatively new pirate-themed rooms, saying guests are willing to pay a premium for such special accommodations.

Instead of a capital-intensive, physical overhaul of its hotels, Gaylord said its "DreamWorks Experience" package will focus on character-themed amenities, parades, meet-and-greet sessions, poolside activities and more.

But that could change, depending on how the packages are received by guests.

"If this does half what we think it will do, we may invest some capital to take this to the next stage," Reed said. "The opportunity here, we believe, is fairly enormous."

The hotel plans to announce more details about its packages, including prices, in July. The characters will make their debut during Gaylord's usual Christmastime events, beginning in November.

Peter Ricci, director of the hospitality-management program at Florida Atlantic University, called the DreamWorks Experience "a natural" for Gaylord and said it would work best at the company's Orlando property, which is on Disney World's doorstep. Both leisure and business travelers expect a little themed entertainment in such situations, he said.

"Packages like that work very well in destinations that are surrounded by that type of entertainment," Ricci said. "In Orlando, I think it will do very well."

Ricci said he also thinks business travelers won't mind coming across a famous, giant ogre in their hotel lobby, especially while visiting Orlando.

"The conventions and the business travelers usually get a kick out of those things," he said.