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OLD WAREHOUSE WILL ALLOW YOU TO VISIT HIGH ON THE HOG

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BY TOM UHLENBROCK

MILWAUKEE — Tim Dixon wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do with a six-story 1907 red-brick warehouse after he bought it 2 1/2 years ago. Harley-Davidson helped him make up his mind.



“Two weeks later, Harley announced its museum,” said Brigette Breitenbach, manager of the warehouse project. “Tim said, ‘That’s going to be a hotel.’”

From the parking lot of the new Harley-Davidson Museum, you can look across the Milwaukee River and see the sign for the Iron Horse Hotel. The name refers to the railroad running nearby, and also to the mode of transportation for the Harley riders. Dixon initially had hoped to have the hotel open in time for Harley-Davidson's 105th anniversary celebration at the museum on July 12. But his timetable was delayed when he sought historical designation for the building, which originally housed the Berger Bedding Co.

“He convinced everyone in the neighborhood to be in a historical district under the National Park Service,” Breitenbach said. “That meant everything from the color of the grout to the shape of the windows had to be approved.”

On a visit in early September, the hotel was a week away from its grand opening. Although it is not affiliated with the museum, the hotel will cater to Harley owners with covered parking spots for motorcycles and luggage carts designed to hold the contents of saddle bags. But with a sleek interior, spacious rooms and a restaurant and bar, the Iron Horse is a luxury boutique hotel that will attract anyone seeking upscale lodging, whether a biker on a Harley or a businessman in a BMW. Or a mix of the two. As Dixon said, “Today’s motorcycle riders are senior executives, CEOs and successful entrepreneurs.”

THE UNIQUE: A carpenter by trade, Dixon renovated the 102-room hotel with an eye toward its architectural features. Much of the original building remains intact — the two-story atrium lobby is built around the ancient wood beams, the steel fire doors remain near the entrance to the restaurant and exposed brick and other structural elements are part of the interior design.

In the furnishings, the antique is blended in with the new. In the bar, the stools are well used draftsmen’s chairs, the kind with wood seats and backs that are adjustable.

THE BASICS: The premium loft rooms on the top floor have high, wood ceilings and beams and eyebrow windows overlooking the city. The spacious corner rooms have a king bed, seating area and a large table for in-room dining. All the rooms have original artwork, a 42-inch LCD flat-screen TV, safes, coffee maker and bar complete with beverage refrigerators. The bathrooms have plush robes, bath and spa products by H2O and tiled walk-in showers with rain shower heads the size of hubcaps.

FOR THE BUSINESS TRAVELER: The hotel has free wireless Internet throughout, functional desks in the rooms, copy and fax services and 24-hour, walk-up business kiosks.

FOR THE BIKER: Besides for the covered parking spaces and saddle-bag carts, the rooms are designed with tile entrances with custom hooks for hanging heavy leathers and a bench for removing and storing boots and helmets. The hotel also has an on-site bike wash station, on-call maintenance and service and long-term cycle storage available. The hotel can even arrange to have your bike shipped to Milwaukee.

THE FOOD: Although the restaurant was not yet open on my visit, the Iron Horse will offer “classic American comfort food with creative seasonal cuisine” at its main dining area, called Smyth. The bar, Branded, promises local beer and cocktails, plus “a menu of comfortable favorites with a kick created by chef Thomas Schultz.” The Library is a book-lined breakfast room, complete with Bloody Marys and Mimosas.

THE HIGH POINTS: The hotel is within walking distance of the new Harley-Davidson Museum, and a short drive to Milwaukee’s lakefront, cultural attractions and theater district. All guest rooms are non-smoking, and the hotel is pet friendly. The hotel has an advanced fitness facility and on-call massage services.

THE LOW POINT: On a tour of the hotel, all the pieces were there but not yet in place. And more is on the way. A street cafe called The Yard, with views of the river, is being built outside, and the lower level of the hotel that once housed an ancient boiler is being transformed into an adults-only hot tub experience called, of course, The Boiler Room.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Nightly rates run from \$199 to \$399. Call 1-888-543-4766, or visit www.theironhorsehotel.com.

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