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Marriott earns four diamonds

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Marriott Shoals Hotel and Spa in Florence has again earned a Four Diamond rating from AAA North America.

AAA does on-site inspections of more than 1,100 hotels in the country, with only 3.5 percent of those earning either Five Diamond or Four Diamond ratings.

Marriott Shoals, which opened in 2005, has earned the Four Diamond distinction for three straight years.

"Four Diamond hotels in an area this size are rare," said Debbie Wilson, director of the Florence-Lauderdale Tourism Bureau. "When people see it in our marketing material that we send to travel groups and in our convention marketing materials, it makes a positive impression."

Larry Bowser, general manager at Marriott Shoals, attended a presentation in Montgomery where AAA Alabama officials made the announcement. He said no lodging group in Alabama has earned more diamonds in a single year than what the Retirement Systems of Alabama earned this year.

"This is definitely a record for Alabama," said Al Gibbs, vice president and general manager of AAA Alabama. "RSA has done a great deal to improve the hospitality level in our state for our AAA members."

Only six hotels statewide earned the Four Diamond rating, with five of those, including Marriott Shoals, affiliated with RSA. The other four are Renaissance Montgomery, The Battle House in Mobile, Renaissance Ross Bridge in Hoover and Grand Hotel Marriott Resort in Point Clear.

RSA, which operates the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, also had two restaurants on the Four Diamond list - The Grand Dining Room in Point Clear and The Trellis Room in Mobile.

The only other north Alabama city with a Four Diamond hotel is Huntsville with the Westin.

"This is a very competitive process, and we're proud to receive the rating again," Bowser said. "We take this seriously, and we want visitors to have a great first impression of our area."

Bowser praised workers, some of whom started when the facility opened in 2005, and

managers for maintaining the rating.

"It has been a challenge but we've had a commitment from the ownership. We've been able to maintain our services even during the economic downturn."

Marriott Shoals is undergoing a \$1 million renovation of its in-hotel restaurant and lounge as well as the pool. Televisions were replaced in all guest rooms as well.

Bowser said all rooms and public areas will undergo improvements in 2011.

"Our goal behind the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and its resort collections is to bring new tourists and businesses to Alabama," David Bronner, chief executive officer of RSA, said in a prepared statement. "Guests are coming from around the world and experiencing Four Diamond properties, cuisine and service. We work very hard to maintain our Four Diamond recognitions."

Wilson said having a Four Diamond hotel in the area is good for the Shoals' reputation and also benefits other lodging facilities.

"This puts us on the map in a lot of ways, especially in the lodging industry," Wilson said. "We now have three other hotel brands building in Florence alone because of the attention Marriott Shoals has received in the lodging industry."

Holiday Inn Express, Residence Inn and Comfort Inn and Suites are being added to the Florence lodging community.

Wilson said other lodging facilities benefit from Marriott's presence in the area and from conventions and other activities that come to the area as result of Marriott's operation.

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