



GLOBAL UPDATE



BACK TO SCHOOL

AJ Capital Partners, Chicago, is giving it the old college try — literally. After observing a lack of creative hotel options in U.S. college towns, CEO Ben Weprin launched Graduate Hotels to target the potential opportunity. With Graduate properties already open in Athens, Georgia, and Tempe, Arizona, Weprin's goal is to open 15 to 20 hotels in the next five years.

"We want to be the first mover in this entire space to grow a national, collegiate-based hotel product," says Weprin, adding that AJ Capital plans to spend US\$500 million developing the brand.

Weprin explains Graduate properties are design-driven and filled

with charm and character while also providing convenient options for travelers in otherwise sparse hotel markets. "There was a complete lack of interesting product in these dynamic towns," he says.

The average Graduate Hotel has 125 to 150 guestrooms with a focus on local food and beverage.

Weprin isn't stuck in the college mindset, however. Since AJ (which stands for Adventurous Journeys) Capital Partners was launched in 2008, its portfolio has grown to include several of Chicago's hottest hotels, including Soho House, Hotel Lincoln and the Chicago Athletic Association opening later this

The Graduate Hotel in Athens, Georgia, opened earlier this year near the University of Georgia and incorporates local design elements to provide guests with charming experiences.

summer in partnership with John Pritzker's Geolo Capital. AJ Capital is also an investment partner in Auberge Resorts and has a stake in Auberge's Calistoga Ranch in Napa Valley, California, and Malliouhana in Anguilla.

"It's really important that we're up for whatever," Weprin says, adding that an estimated 80% of AJ Capital's projects have been complete gut hotel renovations. "That's really what our specialty is and is the hallmark of our company. We've been able to take average hotels and make them great with wonderful design, really good operations and heavy F&B in each one of our assets."