

Wanted: Hotels that pass the white-glove test

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USAToday
September 5, 2002

Bed linens are a priority

Practically the first thing Vacationers Panelist Bonnie Sporn does on entering a hotel room is to "pull down the nasty comforter" and toss it on the floor.

"Every hotel room's bedspread has been sat on by a fat businessman who just got out of the shower," says the Los Angeles resident. She also shudderingly recalls Mike Tyson's 1992 rape trial, when forensic experts found body fluids from previous guests on the spread taken from his hotel bed. "Gross!" she exclaims.

She's not the only one grossed out by those once-omnipresent quilted polyester coverlets - usually dark-patterned to conceal stains and washed who-knows-how-often.

Well aware of consumer queasiness about tucking into a bed that has been slept on by strangers, hotel chains have been laundering the image of their bedspreads.

Westin's "Heavenly Bed" - a pristine sanctum dressed in white, from duvet cover to pillow shams - has won raves and repeat business.

Another chain upgrading bedwear is Hilton, whose brands include Hampton Inns and Embassy Suites. It's replacing spreads with duvets and light-colored covers that will be laundered every day.

"We chose light colors so people can see they're clean," says Hilton's Dennis Koci, senior vice president of operations support. By December, the new "Suite Dreams" bedding - which includes 250-thread-count sheets and pillowcases - will be on executive floors at Hilton properties. It will be phased into standard rooms by 2004 or 2005, Koci says.

Size matters.

But cleanliness is even more important in a hotel room, according to two new surveys.

A dirty guest chamber is cited as the worst-case hotel-room scenario in an online query of 3,764 travelers from around the world conducted by all-hotels.com, an online reservation service. More than two-thirds of respondents, including 69% of the 1,158 Americans who took part in the survey, put filthy surroundings as the top turn-off, followed by rooms that previously have been smoked in.

The keep-it-clean sentiment was echoed in an e-mail questionnaire answered by 93 members of USA TODAY's Vacationers Panel. Forty-three said a dirty room bothers them most, followed by a room that smells of stale butts. Both sets of respondents also dislike cramped rooms.

The surveys are not scientific, but the message is loud and clear.

If a room is dirty, "nothing else can make it satisfactory," says Vacationers Panelist Jane Snell of Cortland, N.Y.

She recalls checking into a chain motel off the interstate, only to find that the sheets appeared to have been slept in. She alerted the front desk and was told: "Turn them over."

"Boy, that ticks me off when the sheets look like they were not changed and the bathroom looks like it was overlooked," says Vacationers Panelist Walter Greene of Edinburg, Texas.

Checking the cleanliness of the bathroom is the first order of business for those in both surveys. A hefty 48% of Americans in the all-hotels.com survey put that ahead of unpacking or turning on the TV, as did a third of Vacationers Panelists.

Women in both surveys tend to be more fastidious than men.

"There's nothing worse than checking into your room after putting in an 18-hour day and finding hair in the bathtub — ewww!!" exclaims panelist Barb Pontello of Belleair Bluffs, Fla.

Panelist Bill Kalmar of Lake Orion, Mich., says his wife, Mary, attacks hotel bathrooms with her ever-present spray can of Lysol.

Adds panelist Roger Casty of Winnetka, Ill.: "My wife never leaves home without her Lime Away."

Panelist Kendra Shrode of Midland, Mich., inspects the shower "for cleanliness, and to check that no one is hiding (there)."

Panelist Jack Briggs of Cameron, Mo., says his wife goes on a different sort of search mission. She leafs through bedside Bibles, where she once found \$50 tucked away, and checks under the seat cushions for fallen change.

Other panelists shared hotel-room rituals that weren't on the questionnaire.

Shrode, for example, goes out in the hall to count the doors to the fire exit, should a hasty escape in dark or smoky conditions be called for.

Americans also have a fastidiousness about toilet paper, according to the all-hotels survey. In fact, 19% of Statesiders rated poor-quality TP the No. 1 hotel-room annoyance.

And a few USA TODAY panelists took a swipe at hotel toilet paper. "Single-ply TP is the pits," says Joey Magsipok of Houston.

Says all-hotels CEO Jane Karwoski: "You don't notice it (toilet paper) when it's good, but boy, you notice it when it's bad!"

She thinks the survey confirms that today's travelers have high expectations when they unlock a hotel room door and set down their bags. "The hotel has become someone's home away from home, and the hoteliers need to take that seriously," she says.

Hoteliers also might benefit from paying closer attention to the emotional aspects of bedding down away from home, says Jonathan Barsky, an associate professor of marketing at the University of San Francisco. He also is a partner in Market Metrix, which measures consumer satisfaction with various aspects of the hospitality industry and helps companies improve it.

The emotions that a guest feels during a stay are "critical" components of satisfaction and loyalty, Barsky says, citing the firm's just-released study of 30,000 recent guests of U.S. hotels. The study found that customers who reported positive emotions — feeling comfortable, pampered, relaxed, secure — were more likely to be loyal to a specific hotel chain and less price-sensitive.

Clients of luxury hotels want to feel pampered, sophisticated and relaxed, Barsky says. For those staying in economy lodgings, the buzzwords are "comfortable, content and practical."

Complaints most frequently mentioned in the Market Metrix survey: The room was occupied when I got there; local calls were too expensive; Internet connection was bad or costly; room-service food was expensive and bad; the maid woke me up; the wake-up call never came; the room smelled of smoke.

Room odor is a key factor driving customer satisfaction, says a recent J.D. Power and Associates survey of 13,000 North American hotel guests. Of 17 room attributes listed, smell had "the highest contribution to overall satisfaction" in most hotel categories, says Linda Hirneise, a J.D. Power executive.

Guests also are happier with lots of elbow room, says Mark Ranieri, front office manager at the new Flatotel in New York City. "The size of the room and the bathroom is key."

When it comes to what they like most about staying in a hotel room, sleeping and TV watching are most mentioned by those in the USA TODAY survey.

As for hotel hanky-panky, well, romance tied for third among hotel-room activities in USA TODAY's write-in — along with ordering room service.

According to the all-hotels survey, "romantic moments" were what 52% of Europeans sought in a hotel experience. "Sleeping" was the top choice of 55% of American respondents.

Others in the USA TODAY survey wrote in with different reasons why a hotel stay appeals to them: the idea of getting away from the world and cocooning.

"With family, friends, dogs, etc., it's a rare occasion to be able to do what I want ... no one to bother me!" says Agnes Huff of Los Angeles. "I use a hotel room for that kind of alone time."

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