

**Hotel Horror Stories**

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Since most *Current Contents*® readers attend several international or national conferences each year, the following notes from my travels may interest you.

One of my many horrifying experiences occurred last year in a Swiss hotel. After registering, the reception clerk inadvertently gave me the key to the wrong room. Luckily, I didn't walk in on anyone—although that has happened to me on a few occasions. After unpacking I tried to make a few long distance telephone calls. The *same* clerk, believing I was someone who had sneaked into an unoccupied room for the purpose of making free calls, kept insisting that the lines were busy. After more than an hour of frustration, I went down to the lobby to discover the real reason why the overseas lines were so busy at midnight. But by then it was too late to place my calls.

Hospitality certainly appears to be a dying art. This doesn't mean that you can't find it—but it is usually found only in the smaller hotels and lodges. Unfortunately, international meetings need to be held in large hotels where

"hospitality" is a foreign word. In such places, contrary to the popular phrase, the customer is *never* right.

For example, several years ago I made a reservation at a Sheraton Hotel in New Orleans. I arrived close to midnight, accompanied by two of my children. Even though our reservation had been confirmed only three hours earlier, I was told there was no record of it. They even denied the existence of the telephone operator whose name I quoted as having made the confirmation. The uncooperative manager of that hotel didn't find a room until I started shouting as loudly as possible that I would not leave until he found one, even if *he* had to sleep in the lobby himself. They could hear me several blocks away on Bourbon Street, above the sound of several Dixieland bands. Thirty minutes later I had my room—and a very hoarse voice. This tactic reminds me of the line from the movie "Network" where the main character, Howard Beale (Peter Finch), advises the audience to go to their windows and scream out loud, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it any more!"

In Latin countries, it is impossible to find anyone who can spell or pronounce my name--it is often filed under *Garcia*. The French pronounce it *garfeeyeld*. Given the different languages and cultures, I suppose such mistakes are to be expected. But should the same thing happen in my own country? Recently, I arrived at a posh San Francisco hotel at 11:45 p.m. The room clerk dutifully searched his reservation records, and after going through several files finally located mine under a misspelled version of my name. A victim of another clerk's bad penmanship, I was exasperated to discover that I had been filed under *Sarfied*.

Apparently hotel managers, unlike scientists, rarely travel themselves. Or if they do travel, perhaps they are so familiar with standard hotel operating procedure that they know precisely when to arrive. Just as restaurant hostesses and headwaiters save the best tables for the last to arrive, so clerks do the same with rooms--the worst always seem to go to the first to check in. If you arrive at a hotel past midnight—and they can find your reservation—you are apt to receive a three-room suite with a king-size bed. You are told, "This is all we have left." Should you arrive before noon, you will be lucky to get into your room at all, since its availability does not depend on how fatigued you may be or on how far in advance your reservation was made, but rather on the order in which the housekeeper chooses to make up the rooms. I've

slept many hours in hotel lobbies while maids chased guests out of their rooms in order to make their beds--while my empty room went untouched.

However, I don't want to be too harsh on hotel maids. They are among the most neglected and underpaid people in the services field. And it is too easy to blame them for hotel mismanagement and disorganization. I always seek out the maid and put my tip in her hand--with much greater pleasure than with the bellhop, who expects a dollar for carrying my briefcase.

One time I arrived at one of the really posh hotels in London. It was 8:00 a.m. London time but 3:00 a.m. in Philadelphia. I was told that my room, which had been reserved since the previous day, wasn't ready because the maid couldn't prepare it. They were waiting for a guest to depart, having rented my room to him even though I had paid for it in advance. I fell asleep in the lobby and they didn't call me until after noon!

If there's one thing I've learned about hotels it is this: they are designed primarily for the benefit of the people who work there. Not only must guests fend for themselves, but they are often made to feel like intruders or outcasts. I particularly dislike the disdainful glare of the doorman who expects to be tipped for opening a cab door or lifting a bag out of your hand even though you didn't ask for the help. And then the bellhop takes over where the doorman

leaves off--usually 10 yards away. This double-tipping ploy is aggravated by archaic hotel union rules. These agreements define the territorial limits of the doorman and bellhop as those boundaries which maximize tips to both. But there are wonderful exceptions. The doorman at a famous hotel in Copenhagen was delightful before he retired as a rich man. In Philadelphia the most courteous doorman in town works for Bookbinders, a restaurant near ISI®.

When in Europe, I desperately look forward to finding the *International Herald Tribune*. It is amazing how inaccessible it can be if you don't carefully plan for its purchase. Hotels never think to reserve one copy in the lobby for late arrivals.

I can't understand why hotels provide TV sets but not a daily TV guide so that you don't have to spend ten minutes scrambling through the channels in order to find something interesting. One day I expect that hotel guests will have access to Viewdata or a similar news system. Viewdata is an experimental British system for which ISI provides a science news segment. You simply dial any one of several categories in which you are interested, and Viewdata displays the most recent news reports on your TV screen. The provision of free movies via closed-circuit TV in hotels should also be encouraged.

I resent the preferential treatment given to those who drink alcohol. Are those of us who drink rarely or not at

all unworthy of consideration? That some hotel would refuse to bring hot chocolate to my room but would gladly deliver a bottle of Scotch or any other alcoholic beverage seems to me to be discriminatory, as well as inconvenient. It is therefore a delight that certain hotels in Paris now have a combination bar and ice cream parlor open until 3:00 a.m.

Hotels traditionally provide soap in generous quantities. I've often wondered what happens to all those slightly used bars of soap. Do the hotels recycle them? I'd gladly accept a smaller bar of soap if only they would supply one-shot doses of shampoo and toothpaste--two items among many that the weary traveller never seems able to find when they are needed.

And is it so crazy to suggest that a pool or sauna be open as late as midnight or as early as 7:00 a.m.? I'm always arriving too early or too late for such pleasures. Even in Iceland, which is known for its natural hot-water springs and numerous swimming pools, I couldn't use the facilities because they were closed in the hours available to me after business obligations.

Too many hotel services just are not geared to the needs of the traveller. Consider the problem of laundry and dry cleaning. Hotels everywhere have yet to discover the washing machine or, as it is euphemistically referred to, automatic laundry service. Heaven forbid that a swanky, international hotel chain should install its own

washing or dry cleaning machine, or even a coin-operated one that its guests could use.

Did you ever try to get clothes cleaned or pressed after 5:00 p.m. or on a Saturday or Sunday? It just isn't done. I've frequently arrived at hotels on Friday evenings, after six or seven hours in transit, and requested that a suit be pressed. The answer I've received most often is that they'd be happy to accommodate me on Monday morning.

But of course everyone knows that hotel guests are very refined. We never spill drinks on our clothes. We emerge from hours of travel without a crease or stain. And we know how to pack clothes so that they won't wrinkle. Fortunately, wrinkle-free clothes and quick-drying fabrics make the old adage work--the Lord helps those who help themselves. I often wash my own socks, underwear, and even shirts on a long journey. And I carry my own shoeshine cloth.

I remember a time when it was a beautiful European custom to leave your dull, scuffed shoes outside the door overnight and awaken to find them spotless and brilliantly shined. This was never a custom, nor is it safe to try, in an American hotel. Recently, I visited Germany and Italy and discovered that the hall porter's shoeshine has been replaced by a mechanical shoepolisher. I don't mind this so much except that the neutral polish they provide is no substitute for real shoe polish. So I carry my own supply.

These common hotel annoyances aside, my greatest agony is hotel telephones and their operators. I have lost incalculable time because of hotels' inadequate training of telephone operators. In my opinion, hotels ought to require phone operators to have degrees in information science. Considering what some graduate information specialists earn these days as librarians, they might just as well become telephone operators! The ideal telephone operator would master the local geography and be fully familiar with the neighboring restaurants, theaters, museums, athletic facilities, points of historical interest, clubs, and other places of culture and entertainment.

One solution to the problem of providing information to hotel guests might be the European concierge--almost an unknown phenomenon in America. I've had great help from the concierge in European hotels. But he or she usually can't tell you exactly what musical or other cultural events are occurring. The Hyatt Regency in New Orleans does have a concierge. She was very helpful to me during a recent visit. Hotels everywhere provide guests with little booklets that advertise the nearest striptease cabaret but rarely mention the local chamber music society or jazz club. A decent concierge would keep aware of local cultural events and maintain an accurate cinema and theater schedule. Although several cities have printed guides, they are rarely found at the hotel reception desk.

In any case, a decent concierge would enable the phone operator to concentrate on operating the telephone system. The necessity of reliable hotel phone service is illustrated by some examples.

About ten years ago I visited Portland, Oregon, to give a lecture at the Portland State College. A message containing the time and place of the lecture was to be left for me at the Hilton Hotel.

Meanwhile, I went across the river to visit some *Current Contents* readers at the Crown Zellerbach research laboratories. During my visit, I called the hotel every half hour, expecting to receive a message indicating the time and place of the agreed-upon lecture. When I came back to the hotel that afternoon, there still was no message. I called the professor involved, only to be informed that I was supposed to be there an hour earlier--that 50 students and faculty had arrived and left after waiting 30 minutes.

The hotel denied receiving the message. Later on, it turned out that a clerk had misfiled it in some other guest's key slot. My attorney informed me that the hotel was liable only for provable damages. How do you establish the worth of a lecture you haven't delivered? What is the dollar value of 50 wasted half-hours or a missed opportunity to meet some interesting people?

Such experiences lead you to organize arrangements in a less casual fashion. Your life becomes one of

redundancy--always checking and re-checking to make certain there have been no slip-ups. In fact, the situation is so bad these days that I always call the hotel and ask for myself, to check if I am registered in the right room. On three separate occasions in London this year the operators denied I was registered.

I did have a very positive experience with hotel telephone operators in Copenhagen once. The hotel's manager had calculated that the audience expected for my lecture would fit comfortably into what they called a conference room. However, the ceiling was so low that we could not raise the movie screen high enough to be seen. We had to transfer the lecture to the club of the local Engineering Society. But how would we notify the audience? The operators looked up all the registered attendees' phone numbers and called as many as possible. Then we posted a bellboy at the front door and arranged to use the hotel station wagon to shuttle all of those who arrived at the hotel over to the lecture. The hotel had gotten the Engineering Society's chef to quickly arrange a fantastic display of hors d'oeuvres and drinks. Everyone was kept delightfully happy during the delay.

Some hotel telephone operators try to be helpful but cannot overcome the deficiencies of an inadequately staffed switchboard. That is why I conscientiously avoid any hotel that does not have an automatic dialing system. This may deny me the pleasures and

advantages of a small hotel, but I'd rather suffer the impersonal atmosphere of a large hotel and avoid frustrating delays in making calls. Many small European hotels now offer free local calls, a practice which is not widespread in the U.S.A. But many European hotels also place a scandalous surcharge on long-distance calls. In Spain one hotel refuses to place collect calls. They insist that such operator-assisted calls are delayed for hours. However, the charge for direct dialing is triple that from a public phone.

One problem I often have while travelling is beyond my diplomatic capabilities. How do you tell friends or colleagues you have just arrived in their town, after travelling 5,000 miles, but don't have time to accept *their* invitation to dinner or to visit their lab or tour their university? When I was in eastern Europe recently, I found this particularly frustrating because the opportunities to meet foreign scientists in that part of the world are less common than elsewhere. I always feel bad when I am in a friend's home town and would like to say hello but, due to other commitments, simply do not have the time to accept the friend's hospitality. As the publisher of *Current Contents*, I value the opportunity to talk to as many readers as possible. Local calls are a way of keeping in touch. So if you

receive a call one day, forgive me if I don't accept your invitation to lunch.

My complaints about hotels may seem exaggerated. Indeed, my caustic remarks may appear unkind to the many individual hotels and their employees who treat guests quite royally. After having enjoyed many pleasurable stays in certain hotels, it is fairly easy to criticize the bad experiences. One tends to forget the pleasant though uneventful visits and to remember only the horror stories.

For example, recently I was late for my departure on a flight to London. Pan Am refused to let me carry my suitcase on board, so it was sent on the following flight. When I arrived at my hotel in London the receptionist inquired about my missing baggage. Then he took a look at me and said he would contact the housekeeper, who keeps an electric razor on hand. But the hotel could not supply the other necessities that are impossible to obtain at a late hour. Always keep a spare toothbrush in your briefcase. I hesitate to carry toothpaste. The last time I did it broke open and messed up the first draft of this polemic.

I fully agree with Samuel Johnson, a literary man of wide-ranging travels, who so eloquently stated 200 years ago: "There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn."<sup>1</sup>

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#### REFERENCE

1. Boswell J. *Life of Johnson*. 1776. Quoted in: Bartlett J. *Familiar Quotations*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1968. p. 432.