

LIFE | TRAVEL | OFF DUTY TRAVEL

Are High-Tech Hotels Alluring—or Alienating?

As hotels rush to incorporate cutting-edge technology into the guest experience, travelers are split: While some are turned off by robots and text-based 'hospitality,' others love the cool efficiency of a futuristic home-away-from-home



PHOTO: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; GETTY (ROOM); F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (PHONE); ISTOCK (TRAY)

By **MATTHEW KRONBERG**

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WHEN Daniel Politeski, an engineer from Vancouver, Canada, approached the check-in desk at the Henn-na Hotel, near Nagasaki, Japan, two staffers were waiting to serve him: Should he approach the young woman in a cream business suit or her colleague, who bore a close resemblance to a Tyrannosaurus Rex?

He went with the T-Rex, not just because interacting with a dinosaur seemed novel, or because he liked its bow tie, but because it was the one that spoke English. The young woman took no offense at being bypassed; she, like her reptilian co-worker, was a robot.

They're not the only ones.

At the Hilton McLean Tysons Corner in Virginia, which houses a sort of a R&D division for the Hilton hotel group and always has about 30 experiments under way, guests can interact with Connie. Named for Conrad Hilton, the chain's founder, this 2-foot-tall robotic concierge is stationed at the reception desk. Like the love child of Siri and Jeeves, he uses cognitive reasoning powered by IBM's Watson system to answer basic (for now) questions about the hotel's services. He'll tell you how to find the gym or when the bar will mix its last mojito.

At the Aloft hotel in Cupertino, Calif., guests who request a toothbrush or razor from the front desk will find Botlr, a short, poker-faced servant-on-wheels, delivering it to their door. Neither Botlr nor Connie care if you stiff them on a tip.

Although these robot-staffed hotels might suggest “Fawlty Towers,” whimsically recast with C-3PO and R2-D2, some travelers take a darker view. Mr. Politeski likened the female attendant at the Henn-na Hotel to Pris, the murderous android played by Daryl Hannah in “Blade Runner.” Do such experiments portend a grim future where classic models of hospitality have given way to cold efficiency and technological novelty for novelty’s-sake? Not necessarily.

While the robots are a relatively new development, the intent behind them is not. Hoteliers have long used expensive, cutting-edge advances both to attract guests and streamline service. “Hotels have always had the resources to innovate and incorporate new technologies into their buildings long before the costs came down enough for the less affluent to acquire them,” said Molly Berger, author of “Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America 1829-1929.”



TECH CHECK-IN | Two robots handle the front desk at the year-old Henn-na Hotel, in Japan's Huis Ten Bosch theme park; the dinosaur robot (right) speaks English.

Maria Razumich-Zec, regional vice president and general manager of the Peninsula Chicago, among the most technologically innovative hotels in the U.S., thinks it’s unlikely that automated desk agents and concierges will become as ubiquitous in hotels as TVs, especially not in luxury hotels. “Technology is part of Peninsula’s DNA,” said Ms. Razumich-Zec, “but it doesn’t take the place of human interaction. We believe there’s no substitute for the personal touch.” Jackie Kashian, a Los Angeles-based stand-up comic who’s on the road roughly 135 nights a year, agrees. “I like to walk into a hotel, know where the front desk is, and then know that I can ask for the things I want,” said Ms. Kashian. “You ever go to one of those boutique hotels and you can’t find the check-in desk because there isn’t one?” she said. Technology is indeed creating more minimalist hotels, affecting the character, and even the basic mechanics, of a guest’s stay in significant ways. The biggest changes ahead, however, are likely to appear thanks to a device most of us already know intimately—our smartphones.

The Arrive, a recently opened (and robot-free) hotel in Palm Springs, looks like an updated version of a midcentury motel. Cabanas with fire pits line the pool, while palm trees sway beyond the angled roof, which is clad in artfully rusted Corten steel. The property, though, is newly built and designed to integrate technology into the hotel experience as naturally as it is integrated into guests’ everyday lives. Well, maybe a touch better. My room had blazing-fast free Wi-Fi, bedside push-button controls to orchestrate the lights and the drapes over the clerestory windows and a 42-inch television outfitted with Apple TV, so I could stream content from my phone (or tablet) onto the television.

In one recent survey, conducted for Hotel Internet Services, a provider of in-room tech, more than 75% of respondents said they’d prefer to watch their own media over a hotel’s video-on-demand options. “Being assaulted by the in-house channel when I turn the TV on is just a pain,” said Jeff Rubenstein, a technology executive who travels one to two weeks a month. “I want the freedom to display my own content on the screen I choose.”

I do, too. But when I tried to stream “House of Cards” from my iPad to the Arrive’s TV, I couldn’t make it work. Frank Underwood, Kevin Spacey’s malevolent character, watched me struggle, his face paused in a rictus of contempt. I decided to reach out for help. It was then that I noticed that my quarters lacked one piece of technology that’s



I, ROBOT | From left, Botlr, the automated butler, at the Aloft hotel in Cupertino, Calif.; Connie toils away at a Hilton reception desk.

traditionally more common to hotel rooms than Gideon's Bible—a telephone. The guest handbook invited me to use my own mobile phone and “text us if you need anything.” I did. The first response was immediate, and the time between follow-up texts was no longer (and far less annoying) than even the briefest of telephone holds. The problem, as it turned out, was my geriatric (circa 2012) iPad. A workaround was found, and when I wanted to thank the helpful, nameless staffer I'd been texting with, I found myself at a loss for proper etiquette. Do I send an emoji thumb's up, or a suddenly stodgy-seeming “thank you”?

The next morning I met with Ezra Callahan, one of Arrive's owners, who is known in some circles as Facebook employee #6 (he left the social-network company in 2010). The text-first approach, said Mr. Callahan, seemed like an obvious way to “lower the barrier to ongoing communication” between guest and hotel. He and his colleagues were initially less sure what tone that communication should take. “It's funny to think about it, but we've created a professional texter position,” said Mr. Callahan. “[Writing the texts] requires a strong sense of service and hospitality. Polite, but there's an air of formality. If we get [a guest] who is more casual—who is responding with emoticons—we reply appropriately.”

Once Arrive's owners considered that most guests would be using their own mobile handsets, landline phones seemed unnecessary and even a little arcane. “We recognize that there's a small percentage of travelers that we're going to alienate with that and with texting, but we're willing to take that hit to achieve where we want to go,” Mr. Callahan said. It's a move that's being discussed (if not yet acted on) by larger hotel groups, too. “We have a lot of debates in our company about [going phoneless],” said Jim Houthouser, executive vice president for global brands at Hilton Worldwide.

Will anything else be replaced by your iPhone? Many hotels have already done away with complimentary printed newspapers. And it looks like the room keycard is next on the chopping block. According to Brian McGuinness, global brand leader for specialty select brands at Starwood Hotels & Resort Worldwide Inc., room keys will be gone “in the next two to three years.” Replacing them will be—you guessed it—your smartphone (or smartwatch, if you're so equipped.) When you're within grasping distance of your room's door, your chosen device will unlock it by sharing an encrypted passcode with it, typically via a hotel's app. It's a technology that's been rolling out among larger hotel groups, including Starwood, Marriott International and Hilton hotels, for a few years.

Guests, of course, need to feel secure before they sign on to this new digital regimen, said Mr. McGuinness, which means making sure that when guests check out, “their room is scrubbed completely of their content.” At Starwood's Element hotel in Harrison, N.J., guest rooms come with “digital” mirrors on which weather, maps and headlines can be displayed. Those mirrors can also present text messages and other content a guest is

receiving on his phone. “We pulse-checked with our customers and they felt that it was too much,” said Mr. McGuinness, “One guest said, ‘What if I just go get a bucket of ice and a housekeeper comes in and my text messages are on there?’ So we said, let’s leave that functionality off.”

A Short-Circuit Story

A look back at the hospitality industry’s best innovations—and a few clunkers

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Rather than climbing the stairs, guests of the to their floors. The compartment, a precursor lifted and lowered by a massive 90-foot-long

Not all guests, though, seem to want digital evidence of their visit erased. At the Mama Shelter hotel in Los Angeles, instead of traditional TVs, rooms are equipped with remote-controlled 27-inch iMacs. Among the options on the computer’s menu are “Photo & Video Shoot.” Select it, and you can scroll through snapshots and video clips that previous guests have captured of themselves (usually while they were posing on the bed, since that’s where the iMac’s webcam was pointed, and often wearing the sequined animal masks that hang on the rooms’ bedside lamps). You can also contribute your own clips. The images are all PG-rated, no doubt because they have to be approved by the hotel before being posted.

After leaving the Arrive, while driving through the desert past a forest of wind turbines, I realized that I’d forgotten to get a receipt. I stopped and texted the hotel a note asking them to forward a copy. A moment later, the receipt appeared in my email inbox, along with a text thanking me for my stay. I thought of something Mr. Callahan said earlier. “The goal is to make a better guest experience,” he said. “Technology is a tool to that end; it is not an end unto itself.”

Staying Power // Five hotels where you can glimpse the future—or, at least, geek out in style

ARRIVE

Palm Springs, Calif.

While there’s always someone at Arrive hotel’s front desk (which doubles as the hotel bar) to answer your questions in person, text message is the preferred mode of communication. This arrangement is particularly convenient when you’re ensconced poolside and crave



The hotel bar/front desk at Arrive hotel in Palm Springs.

a Cucumber Gin Fizz (*doubles from \$330 a night, arrivehotels.com*).

HENN-NA HOTEL

Sasebo, Japan

At this less than a year-old hotel at the Huis Ten Bosch theme park, the robotic desk agents are not the only wizardry on offer. After check-in, a self-driving luggage cart leads guests to their room. A camera, next to the door, consults the hotel’s facial recognition software before unlocking the room. Inside, you can tell Chu-ri-Robo, a pink-and-green doll, to turn the lights on and off, assuming you speak Japanese (*singles from about \$80 a night, h-n-h.jp/en*).

HILTON MCLEAN TYSONS CORNER

McLean, Va.

Part of the fun of staying at this Hilton is never knowing what new amenities will be available. Among the latest is a noise cancellation system for your entire hotel room, no headphones required (*doubles from \$90 a night, hilton.com*).



Hub by Premier Inn

HUB BY PREMIER INN

Spitalfields, London

Not only do guests use the hotel app to control the TV, lighting and air-conditioning in their rooms at this budget hotel near Brick Lane (as well as its sister properties through the U.K.), the app also serves as a local guide. Point your smartphone's camera at the wall-size illustrated map

in each room and recommendations for restaurants, bars and cultural activities will suddenly appear on your phone's screen (*doubles from \$100 a night, hubhotels.co.uk*).

THE PENINSULA

Chicago, Ill.

Few hotels integrate technology into their rooms as seamlessly as the Peninsula group does, all of it overseen by an in-house 30-person tech lab in Hong Kong. In the U.S., the Chicago property boasts the latest innovations, including a hydra of phone chargers, a connections panel for devices of nearly all vintages and a remarkably intuitive tablet that lets you do everything from open and close the curtains to request buckwheat pillows (*doubles from \$430 a night, peninsula.com*).

The Low-Tech Alternative



Hotel Zed

Attention, Luddites. Here are three hotels—distinguished by a no-tech or vintage-tech approach—that you might find more welcoming

HOTEL ZED

Victoria, British Columbia

At the modishly designed Hotel Zed, rooms come with free wi-fi and a large flat panel TV ready to stream your own media. But it's the vintage tech

that sets the Zed apart. Rooms come with working rotary telephones (there's an instructional video on the hotel's website). The business center is outfitted with typewriters, and the shuttle buses that transport you into the center of town are a 1965 VW microbus and a 1967 VW Westfalia (*doubles from about \$125 a night, hotelzed.com*).

VILLA STÉPHANIE

Baden Baden, Germany

At this luxurious retreat in Germany's Black Forest, flip the silver switch in your room, and wi-fi signals and other "electrosmog" (e.g., the radio waves that perpetually surround us) are blocked by your copper-embedded walls. The hotel claims that special paint keeps out 96% of other microwave and radio signals, all of which is supposed to encourage deeper, more restful sleep (*doubles from about \$622 a night, brenners.com*).

THE ACE HOTEL CHAIN

Many rooms at the nine Ace hotels—known for attracting musicians and other creative types—have acoustic guitars, or turntables with a selection of albums, both classic and modern. While retro tech is welcome in the rooms, Ace public spaces are frequently hives of digital activity, aglow with guests working at laptop (*doubles at the newest Ace Hotel, in New Orleans, from about \$189 a night, acehotel.com*).

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