

Pillow Chocolates Are Passé

After dashing around Paris for several days, it was time to relax. I checked into the Hotel Raphael, the posh 16th arrondissement hide-away once favored by Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. Ensnared in my suite, I phoned room service for a smoked duck sandwich, popped open the half bottle of Champagne from the mini-bar, and began drawing my bath.

Then I set about the business of perusing the book. I don't know what it's called, but you know what I'm talking about—the bound directory of hotel services on the desk or bedside table, which informs guests how to place long distance calls, what the swimming pool hours are, and how much you'll be charged if you try to steal the bathrobe.

I always read through methodically to be sure I don't miss anything. When I got to "W," it read: "Wardrobe. Please contact the housekeeper if you wish to deposit items of clothing in between stays at the hotel."

I read that, and my heart sank. Even in the most hopeful and hallucinatory version of the life I imagine myself leading, I realize that I will never be the sort of person who needs to "deposit" items of clothing in between my stays at the Raphael.

How nice to know that the option exists; there was a time when complimentary overnight shoeshine service was enough to distinguish a hotel as top-notch. Not anymore. Forthwith, here's a roundup of some over-the-top amenities from hotel properties around the world.

ROSE PETAL SHOWER WELCOME

If guests arrive at the Taj Rambaugh Palace in India tired from their journey, they perk up immediately when—upon entering the grounds via horse

carriage or vintage car—they are greeted with a shower of rose petals (symbolic of Jaipur, known as the Pink City), before being given the traditional "tikka" mark on their foreheads and garlanded with jasmine. The hotel can also arrange a "Grand Royal" procession, inspired by the homecoming ceremony once accorded to returning Rajput warriors, with folk musicians, horsemen, and carapisoned elephants and camels lining the driveway—the elephants raising their trunks in salute.

MASSAGE WITH LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT

The Maia Luxury Resort & Spa in the Seychelles is known for above-and-beyond service (each villa comes with a dedicated personal butler), so you won't hear any cheesy New Age soundtracks in the spa, just the music of birds and the natural waterfalls that surround your private, open-air pavilion. If you book the resort's signature "Twenty Dancing Fingers" massage (two masseuses working simultaneously), your treatment will be accompanied by a live flautist.

IN-ROOM PERSONAL MARGARITA BAR

The Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita is a favorite destination of Peninsula-based luxury travel consult-

ant **Gwen Books**. "Just as social butterflies understand 'the grand entrance,'" she says, "a marvelous luxury hotel should understand and practice 'the welcome.' Providing a sense of place is paramount." Checking into a casita at this beachfront property, guests find on their terrace a setup with cocktail shaker and hand-blown Mexican glasses, along with Jalisco pottery vessels filled with all the makings—tequila, limes, Cointreau, salt, ice—of a "me time" margarita.

ENRICHED AIR IN THE ANDES

Smoking or nonsmoking room? Here's another option. Hotel Monasterio in Cusco, 11,000 feet above sea level, takes the idea up a notch, so to speak. Most guest rooms are oxygenated, that is, specially equipped with contraptions that pump in oxygen to help counter the effects of the high altitude.

A PET TO KEEP YOU COMPANY

The thoroughly modern Maximilian Hotel in Prague extends hospitality to guests from around the world. But in August 2002, it offered sanctuary to a local—a goldfish named Max, who arrived on a wave during the severe flood of the Vltava River. Max survived and promised to grant three wishes. The hotel wished for happy, satisfied guests; happy, satisfied employees; and, more goldfish. Today, guests may request a goldfish in their room upon check-in. "We have forty goldfish for seventy rooms," the charming **Jakub** at reception says. Are they all named Max? "No," Jakub laughs. "A guest can give his fish whatever kind of name he would name a fish back home."

MAY WE CHECK UNDER THE HOOD FOR YOU?

Elegant Europeans arrive at the classic Baur au Lac in Zurich confident that every need will be attended to. And that goes for their elegant European cars as well: the hotel keeps an auto mechanic on staff to handle any issues that arise.

YOUR PRIVATE CARIBBEAN ISLAND

Nandana, a villa compound on the west end of Grand Bahama, is the perfect getaway for those looking to vacation unseen by paparazzi—Nandana's plane can shuttle you from Ft. Lauderdale to the private airstrip, where immigration formalities are handled with dispatch. The property, featuring 300 imported palm trees (and four new Land Rovers), is available for groups of up to 12 adults. When you and your pals need a break from scuba, golf, cooking lessons, and flopping into the 120-foot infinity pool, hop aboard the yacht, *Lioness*, for a ride to Nandana's private island—completely deserted, just sand, water toys, and the picnic lunches the chef will provide.

WAKEUP CALL WITH A DIFFERENCE

Prestonfield House Edinburgh has centuries of Scottish tales to tell, both in its opulently appointed rooms and the grounds where peacocks roam. Sir Alexander Dick of Prestonfield introduced rhubarb cultivation to Scotland here in the 18th century, so the James Thomson restaurant on the property is appropriately named Rhubarb. If you want to wake up in time for your breakfast of kippers, porridge, and *finnan haddie*, the hotel can arrange for a championship-award-winning bagpiper to play outside your window.

THE, UM, FACILITIES IN JAPAN

Indoor toilets have been a mainstay in the developed world for more than a century, and their basic functionality has remained essentially unchanged over the years, right? Not at the Peninsula Hotel Tokyo, whose high-tech toilets are mind-bogglingly sophisticated. Somehow sensing your approach, the lid raises itself automatically. The control unit contains 17 (you heard me: *seventeen*) different buttons. Even if I knew what each button does, I wouldn't tell you. I'm sorry, but the *Nob Hill Gazette* is delivered to the homes of ladies and gentlemen, and I'm hoping to be invited back. ■



Fredric Hamber was raised in Napa and San Francisco. His chapter on the Amazon River will appear in the forthcoming volume *Great Boat Journeys of the World*.

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