



TRAVEL INSIDER

Heightening safety, security at top of hotels' to-do lists

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Long before Sept. 11, safety was a concern among hotel guests -- one exploited in such classic movie thrillers as Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" and Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining." The fictional Bates Motel and the Overlook Hotel had safety issues far more profound than secure locks or fire sprinklers.

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, safety and security have become a "top-of-the-mind matter for hotel guests and managers alike," says Cathy Enz, executive director of the Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

She and an associate, Masako Taylor, have recently completed an analysis of safety features at more than 2,100 U.S. lodgings. An architecture firm and a fledgling company that created a safety standard for U.S. hotels also have examined the issue. Here are some of their findings and thoughts:

Security equipment: Enz and Taylor looked at whether hotels reported having such safety devices as sprinklers, smoke detectors, electronic locks, interior corridors (considered safer than external walkways because access is more limited), security cameras and safety literature and videos. They gathered their information from a 2001 survey for the American Hotel & Lodging Assn. Two scores were developed: one for safety, focused on fire and accident prevention, and one for security, focused on theft and crime prevention. Hotels got points on a 100-point scale based on how many of the safety devices they had.

On the whole, hotels averaged 66% on the safety index and 60% on the security index. Both figures jump into the 80s when hotels less than 14 years old with more than 150 rooms are considered, Enz says.

Based on these findings, you're more apt to find key safety and security equipment at a large, new, luxury hotel near an airport than at a small, vintage resort or bed-and-breakfast.

Hotels with 250 or more rooms averaged in the high 70s on both indexes; those with 20 to 39 rooms averaged 48% on safety and 26% on security. Hotels less than 7 years old averaged in the high 70s on both indexes; those 29 years or older scored 57% on safety and 47% on security.

Luxury hotels averaged 82% on the safety index, 79% for security; economy hotels scored in the 60s. Rated by type of hotel, those near airports averaged in the high 70s on both indexes; resorts averaged 61% on safety, 46% on security.

Enz readily acknowledges her study has limits. It may overestimate preparedness because hotels with key equipment may have been more likely to answer the survey's security questions than those without. Security depends on other factors besides equipment, she notes. A small B&B that uses keys in a residential neighborhood may be more secure than a large airport hotel with electronic locks because the B&B owner can easily monitor who is a guest and who is not.

Tips from business travelers: In an unscientific but intriguing survey, Atlanta-based hospitality architects John Portman & Associates e-mailed about 13,000 Fortune 1000 business executives about their security preferences. About 1% responded, said Vice President Ellis Katz.

Asked to rate hotel security in general from 1 to 10, 70% rated it a 6 or above.

But they did have concerns. More than half said they look for a hotel room below the 10th floor and parking facilities adjacent to the hotel instead of underneath. (Security experts suggest avoiding rooms above the 10th floor because many fire ladders can't reach that high, and rooms on the first floor because they are easier to break into.)

About three-fourths would like to have cameras outside their door, with a monitor in their room to show who's outside, and an in-room "panic button" that alerts the front desk to problems.

And 80% would be willing to spend 5% or more for a room with better security. "Security-conscious travelers are willing to pay for added security features," Katz concludes.

A safety seal of approval: John C. Fannin III has a vision and a company. Now all he needs are clients.

Fannin, former president of a consulting firm specializing in fire protection and security, now heads SafePlace Corp. in Wilmington, Del., which aims to become a nationwide independent accreditor of hotel safety and security standards.

Applicants submit to an on-site inspection by SafePlace that considers not just safety equipment but also whether there are policies and procedures to use it

correctly. Hotels that pass get a shield they can display in the lobby and on literature. So far, only the AAA Four Diamond-rated Hotel du Pont in Wilmington has been accredited, although Fannin says hundreds have inquired about inspections. But he has some interesting points about security.

Fire safety is governed by local codes, but there are no national standards for which security features hotels should have, such as electronic locks and video cameras, he says. (AAA-rated hotels must provide "adequate illumination" in public areas and equip guest rooms with deadbolt locks, primary locks and either door peepholes or a "window convenient to the door.")

"People require more safety standards of their toaster than they do a hotel," Fannin contends.

Without policies and a vigilant staff, security equipment is nearly useless, he adds. He cites a friend who, armed with an electronic key card, recently walked into his assigned Fort Lauderdale, Fla., hotel room, and found a couple already checked in there. The clerk then gave him a key card to a different room -- and let him keep the old card.

Fannin suggests hotel customers ask tough questions when reserving a room and on arrival. These include: Is there a well-trained security staff on site 24 hours a day? Are criminal background checks and drug tests performed on every employee?

When I asked Fannin about the most common security precaution that hotels neglect, his answer was simple: hiring credible staff.

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