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### TRAVEL INSIDER

# Hotels get hip to the needs of 21st Century travelers

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By Alfred Borcover | Special to the Chicago Tribune  
July 20, 2008

From radio-frequency-controlled door locks to [Nintendo](#) Wii, hotel rooms are getting techier. Plain vanilla rooms are going the way of the Ma and Pa motels strung along long-forgotten byways.

Showing up in hotels and other lodging establishments are Wi-Fi, high-definition flat-screen TVs, Xbox games, iPod docking stations, computer accouterments, computerized room controls and electronic door viewers that let guests clearly see who's knocking.

Some of these bells and whistles are geared to technologically inclined guests in their 20s through 40s.

Veteran hotel man Joseph McInerney, president and CEO of the Washington-based American Hotel & Lodging Association, admits that much of the technology now available in guest rooms is lost on him. Several months ago he spent a night in the specially equipped "X-room" at Marriott's Courtyard Newark on the University of [Delaware](#) campus.

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The hotel, owned by the university, serves as a learning lab for the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management, and the X-room contains the latest gadgets. "I couldn't figure out the alarm clock, and I had trouble finding CNN on the plasma TV with 500 channels," he said, laughing.

Nevertheless, hotel chains are hot for the technology.

In its 2008 Lodging Survey, released in June, the hotel and lodging association found that 86 percent of 10,350 responding hotels offered Wi-Fi. Among those who didn't, 20 percent planned to install Wi-Fi within the next five years. The survey showed that among other extras guests have requested from the hotels are in-room entertainment systems and airline check-in kiosks. The survey also found that:

- 93 percent provide high-speed Internet access, up from 89 percent in 2006 and 50 percent in 2004.
- 72 percent have a computer in the lobby for guests to access the Internet.
- 43 percent have flat-screen TVs in their rooms.
- 35 percent offer iPod docking stations, most of them at luxe hotels.
- Only 12 percent have in-room DVD players.

Though much hotel technology is just catching on in the U.S., top Asian hotels have been ahead of the curve for years.

Bill Sullivan, general manager at Courtyard Newark, noted that the Hong Kong-based Peninsula Hotels group "is probably at the top of hotels rolling out technology to guests. They don't have all the stuff we have, but they have a lot of things they've had for years."

As early as eight years ago my wife and I stayed at the Peninsula in Hong Kong. From a

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bedside console that held a phone with multiple lines, I could open and close the drapes, fade the room lights to black, control the temperature, see what time it was in Chicago and around the world, and more. When we left the room, a door-side panel displayed the outside temperature and humidity.

The Peninsula group, with five hotels in Asia and three in the U.S., employs a staff of 29 who work on proprietary high-tech amenities, said Susan Ellefson, a spokeswoman in Chicago. All Peninsulas, she said, offer guests the same technology.

At Chicago's Ritz-Carlton, a Four Seasons hotel that was named the best in the U.S. by Conde Nast Traveler, rooms have TVs that allow guests to connect to the Internet, said spokeswoman Susan Maier. The rooms also have stereos with CD players and desks equipped with high-speed Internet access, if guests want to use their own computers.

Meanwhile, back at the X-room, Sullivan said the latest addition is the Nintendo Wii gaming system, which comes not only with games but also exercise programs. Wii is played through a 42-inch wall-mounted high-definition TV.

"We take some of the newer technologies and put them into a room that guests actually use and give us feedback that we can share with vendors," Sullivan said.

Among the room's gadgets, besides the 17-inch flat-screen Dell computer monitor:

- Guest Room Digital Assistant, with a color touch-screen display, lets guests control room temperature and lighting and gives them access to guest-services information.
- An AnyFill Speed Charger for cell phones, digital cameras or most anything else that might need charging.
- Clocky, a quirky alarm clock that gives you one chance to get out of bed before it wheels off the nightstand and sends you on a merry chase to shut it off.
- Digital Door Viewer, a door-mounted color video system that lets you see with the touch of a button who is knocking at your door.

The room also is used to test the latest "green" innovations, such as mattresses, shower heads and hair dryers.

At the June HITEC show in Austin, [Texas](#), sponsored by Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals, scores of new products were integrated into the showcase Guest Room 2010. Among the innovations:

- LUX-HDA mirage system lets the guests choose the room's artwork—original oils, watercolors and monoprints—from a thumbnail gallery displayed on an electronic tablet. The system then projects the art onto a wall panel.

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- "Hotels are doing more and more research on what customers want," McInerney said. "I've seen more research in the last five years than in the first 40 years I was in the business."

But he had this caveat for hotels: Provide instructions on how the technology works. While the Millennium Generation can tackle these gadgets with ease, hotels can't assume that everyone is tech savvy.

There still are a lot of us with DVD players flashing 12:00.

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