

## Checking into a hotel? Have a safe stay

Have you ever stashed your cash in your hotel dresser drawer? Propped open the door while you went in search of ice? Cozied up to a friendly stranger in the hotel bar? In fact, people do these things all the time. Those of us in the hospitality industry just shake our heads in amazement. It seems when some people travel, they leave their common sense behind.

The fact is, travelers are easy marks and hotels can attract criminals' attention. So smarten up. Here are eight simple rules to keep you — and your property — safe at your hotel.

### Choose your hotel well

Hotel security advisors suggest picking hotels with solid metal doors and lobby layouts that allow employees to watch elevators. But let's get real: This isn't the type of information you can easily ascertain about a property you've never visited. What you can do is carefully examine pictures of the property. Do the rooms open to the outside? If so, it's less secure than a property whose rooms open to the interior (think motels versus hotels). Are there any nighttime shots of the hotel? If so, does the property look well lit?

Also pay attention to the amenities offered. Doormen and bellmen keep watch over the door, making for a safer entrance. Valet parking means you never have to cross a dark parking lot alone. Also look at online reviews of properties. While these reviews aren't always accurate or objective, a pattern of complaints about safety or comments about the "bad" neighborhood should be taken as a warning sign.

### Protect your valuables

It's best to leave valuables at home, but if you can't, please don't stash them in the dresser drawers. That's the first place a thief or dishonest housekeeper will look — no matter how many books or pairs of dirty underwear you throw on top. Better hiding place: the in-room safe. These are pretty secure, but they can easily malfunction, so read the instructions well (and call the maintenance department if you get locked out!).

Best hiding place: the safe-deposit boxes at the front desk or the manager's safe. These safes are protected from the public and often have cameras watching them. When I worked in casino hotels, most high-rollers kept their wads of cash in the safe-deposit boxes, and those guys definitely knew what they were doing.

### Keep your room keys safe

If you lose a key, be sure to tell the front desk agent that you need a new key, not a duplicate. Duplicates are simply copies of existing room keys. They're convenient if you left your key on the nightstand and your family is locked out of the room. But if you've truly lost your key, you must insist that the hotel make a new one. Inserting the new key reprograms the lock, making it impossible for anyone to use the lost key to gain entrance to your room.

### Close your door!

When I had free time as a manager, I would often walk the floors checking for doors that had not been pulled shut or that had been deliberately propped open. I always found dozens! Would you leave the front door to your house standing open? No? Then don't do it at a hotel! And when you're in the room, make it a habit to use all the locks: the deadbolt, the chain — the whole lot. This habit not only promotes safety, it also prevents that embarrassing encounter when the housekeeper pops in just as you step out of the shower.

### Make friends with security

If you see something funny going on, or see people roaming the halls who don't seem to belong, call the operator or the security department. They will gladly investigate. And don't be shy about asking for an escort to your room or car if you feel uncomfortable for any reason.

### Use valet parking

Besides protecting your personal safety, valet service can protect your car and belongings. Hotels usually have no responsibility for any theft or damage to your car if it's in a parking lot. You're better covered in valet parking. But before you hand over your keys, make sure the attendant does a thorough inspection of your car. That way, if your car is returned with a crunched bumper, there will be no doubt that you're not

to blame.

#### Use a car service, not a taxi, if you feel uncomfortable in the neighborhood

Most hotels have good relationships with reputable car companies. These companies can transport you safely, and often for little more than a taxi would charge. And, in the unlikely event that something goes wrong, the hotel will likely have a record of who you left with, and when.

#### Don't be stupid

Don't drink so much that you can't pay attention to your surroundings. Don't invite strangers to your room. I've seen too many men come sheepishly to the front desk in the morning because that friendly gal they met in the bar last night had disappeared by morning — along with the guy's wallet.

What should you do and expect if something happens to you or your property? Notify a security officer and/or a manager immediately. They will ask you to file a detailed report on the incident. You have every right to involve the local authorities, as well. If it were me, and I had something valuable stolen, you can bet I'd file a police report. The more people involved in resolving the situation, the better.

Don't expect immediate results. Hotels must perform a thorough investigation of any incident, and they will most likely have to involve their risk management or legal departments as well as their insurance providers. This is bureaucracy at its worst, but hotels are businesses: While they may be concerned about you, they also have to protect themselves. Insurance and injury scams are common, and hotels are common victims. For this reason, you should never expect an employee to admit fault or to offer immediate compensation. Every employee handbook I've ever seen strictly forbids this. So if something happens to you and the manager isn't groveling, don't take it personally. He's just playing by the (sometimes unfortunate) rules.

So, on your next trip, have fun, be safe and pack your common sense!

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