

HIGH WIRED

The Hotel Room of the Future

by Kelly Stanford

All too often travelers find themselves crawling around on their hotel room floor looking for telephone jacks, waiting ages for room service, stumbling in the dark during late-night trips to the bathroom or puzzling for hours over setting the alarm on the clock radio. Such inconveniences, however minor, may soon be a thing of the past as hotels move quickly to keep up with these high-tech times, bringing the age of Jetson's-like technology to a hotel room near you.

It's not all about high-speed Internet service anymore, which has been the industry's key passion in recent years. Hotels are now using technology to streamline every aspect of their operations, testing and installing new tools and software: handheld computers for curbside check-in; minibars that know your likes and dislikes; thermostats that adjust the temperature according to when you are in the room; digital movies on demand; biometric scanners for tighter security; and electronics that alter everything from the firmness of the mattress to the art on the walls based on your preferences. In other words hotels may soon be delivering a highly personalized experience using highly impersonal machines.

Today, every room is identical which hotel companies believe is more efficient, but why give everyone ESPN when only some people watch it? What if a room was able to change to suit your needs?

One product making it easy to accommodate guests' personal preferences is the Bartech e-fridge™. Currently e-fridges are installed in 18,000 hotel rooms in 25 hotels throughout the United States. The Maryland company's minibar has sensors that detect when a beverage has been removed. The front desk is alerted, your bill is updated and room service knows what to replace in the morning. The e-fridge can also be programmed to change drink prices throughout the day, lowering them during happy hour. In the future, hotel guests could find their minibars stocked only with their favorite drinks and preferences gleaned from past selections.

No need to read up on smartcards, either. Smartcards are key cards that can do a great deal more than simply open the door. NTRU Cryptosystems Inc., an encryption company based in Burlington, Mass., has created the security feature for a chip-equipped key card that uses radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to send information. Simply flash it in front of your door to enter or just keep it in your pocket and aim. The same key could also be linked to your credit card and used to pay for dinner, similar to

what ExxonMobil has done with its Speedpass™. There is no need to sign anything. Eventually the smartcard may even assist with luggage transfer. Place the card in your bag and when the luggage comes off the conveyor belt the airline can retrieve it, scan it and send it straight to your hotel.

Ultimately, the card might also contain a biometric record of your face, a feature that is already being used in other industries. Virginia-based EyeTicket has implemented iris-recognition technology at London's Heathrow Airport that lets frequent travelers on British Airways and Virgin Atlantic bypass long immigration lines. In seconds, the machine can verify your identity. Hotels could possibly use the same technology for security and to make guests' lives easier. In time you could unlock your door by simply looking at it.

Another way to get in your hotel room might be by beaming your PDA at the lock, which would be pre-coded for your arrival. Remote check in via PDA is now being implemented at a handful of hotels, including the Bryant Park Hotel in New York. Upon arrival at the Bryant Park PDA-toting staffers check you in curbside and issue you a key card on your way upstairs, then check you out the same way. In the future you could check yourself in using your own handheld, or even order room service from your taxi en route to the hotel.

Motion detectors might soon become commonplace as well, meaning no more annoying mid-shower knocks at the door. The same infrared sensor that tells housekeeping whether you're in your room can also tell the digital thermostat—accurate to within half a degree—to turn on and off. In 2001, Connecticut-based INNCOM introduced its Ethernet INNweb™ system, which not only controls a room's climate but also provides high-speed Internet access and digital movies on demand.

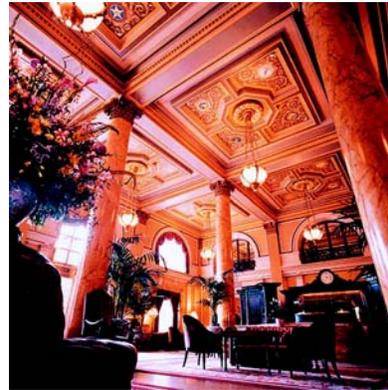


Bartech's e-fridge™

London's Dorchester Hotel is undergoing a year-long renovation during which every room will be equipped with a digital library of 60 films that can be started and stopped on a whim. DVD players and flat-screen plasma televisions are already finding their way into top suites worldwide. The Four Seasons New York unveiled its \$9,500-a-night Royal Suite, with flat-screen televisions in each of the three bedrooms and three bathrooms. These are the same flat screens that industry insiders say could one day make bad hotel art obsolete—when you're not watching television, you'll simply choose your favorite masterpiece for the screen to display, anything from Dali to Degas. In the Royal Suite, if you get up to visit the bathroom in the middle of the night, a bedside switch illuminates a pathway. Wires are virtually invisible, hidden in the hollowed legs of tables.

And although a variety of new technologies are being tested, it may be a while before they are in general use. Some technology companies have fallen off the map altogether, leaving hotels with the infrastructure but without the necessary maintenance or support. And the lumbering economy has forced many hotels to rein in their spending. Still, as the economy rebounds and travelers become more familiar with, and dependent on, advanced technology, it's likely that hotels will continue to innovate, delivering an even more seamless guest experience. When the clock strikes five, who could argue with \$2 happy-hour drinks from the minibar and your favorite DVD on the plasma screen television?

Kelly Stanford is a senior manager for a business consulting and systems integration firm. If you would like to reach her for comment please e-mail info@hospitalityupgrade.com.



Washington, D.C.'s famous Willard Hotel is the world's first wireless minibar installation using Bartech e-fridge™ minibars. The technology makes it easy on the guest and the hotel, and at the same time provides the infrastructure for wireless Internet in each guestroom. It is an enabling hotel technology that is used by guests on a daily basis to improve efficiency and convenience.
