

Hotel guests want experience over amenities

By Nancy Trejos, USA Today

Hotels used to try to keep guests indoors at their bars, restaurants and spas.

Now they're dragging them outside.

Hotels are taking their concierge role to a new level, offering tailored experiences that expose guests to the history, foods and attractions of the community surrounding them. The experiences are often exclusive. Sometimes they're free, but most often, they're not.



Food and wine events leave lasting memories when average foodies get a chance to meet celebrity chefs.
Photo/LTN file

The more expensive they are, the more elaborate they become, such as the \$10,000 "Bucket List" experience offered by the Ritz-Carlton, Charlotte which is available to one guest at a time. The experience changes once it is sold. In April, it will include four floor seats to an NBA Charlotte Bobcats game, a player meet and greet, two nights in a suite, and a

few meals. The full amount goes to a local charity.

Chekitan Dev, an associate professor of marketing and branding at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration and author of "Hospitality Branding", says it is an extension of the pre-recession amenity wars. Now that the economy is getting better, hotel guests value experiences more than they do "stuff."

"Travelers faced a dizzying array of amenities on the bathroom vanity," he says. "Housekeepers had to keep the items stocked, and hotel owners faced bigger bills ... Research that suggests people value experiences more than they value stuff has led many brands to rework their amenities that's less about stuff and more about high value unique experiences coupled with exclusive access."

Some examples:

At the Carlyle, a Rosewood Hotel in New York, young guests can get the "Super Sophie Experience" based on Kelly Florio Kasouf's children's book series, "The Super Adventures of Sophie and The City". Children get loaner iPad minis to follow Sophie's virtual tour of favorite spots such as Grand Central Station, the Chrysler Building, and more. It's included as part of a package starting at \$835 that includes a stay for two and gifts such as an Oscar de la Renta children's dress inspired by the books.

At the Hotel Indigo Long Island-East End, guests can take wine and spirits tours through the "North Fork Uncorked Tour Package." In addition to an overnight stay for two, they get tastings at three vineyards or distilleries, breakfast and snacks. The price: \$270 on weekdays and \$329 on weekends, plus tax.

At the Mandarin Oriental in Washington, D.C., the concierge

arranges a behind the scenes tour of the U.S. Capitol, during which guests can step out onto the balconies overlooking the National Mall. Exclusive tours of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving are available as well. Prices vary depending on timing and number of people. Another D.C. establishment, the Ritz-Carlton, Washington, D.C. is offering two tickets to the new Newseum exhibit marking the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. It is part of a stay for two starting at \$489 a night.

Guests with more limited budgets can still experience unique activities.

At IHG's Holiday Inn Resort Los Cabos in Mexico guests can take a bike tour, free with a stay, through the adjacent estuary, a natural preserve that is home to more than 350 different species of fauna. The tour also takes them through downtown San Jose del Cabo and seasonal attractions such as the local rodeo.

The Fairmont Mayakoba in Mexico's Riviera Maya has recently started to offer to all hotel guests complimentary sea kayaking close to the Mesoamerican Reef, the largest in the Americas.

"Our guests are ... interested in going 'off the guidebook pages' at times, and we look to develop activities, oftentimes with our neighbors and partners, that give them that extra insight or an experience that they haven't had before," says Mike Taylor, a Fairmont spokesman.

Radha Arora, president of Rosewood Hotels and Resorts, says he believes offering guests unique experiences sets Rosewood hotels apart from the competition.

"Rosewood has always strived to offer unique, personalized experiences which acquaint our guests with the destination and provide them with access they may not otherwise have," Arora says.

Maryam Wehe, senior vice president at Applied Predictive Technologies, which does hotel consulting, says hotel guests might rate a hotel stay higher because of a unique experience,

“Leisure travelers who have chosen a hotel for a destination stay are looking to the hotel to create unique memories,” she says. “‘What was memorable? What stood out during this vacation?’ are becoming benchmarks for rating hotel stays. In response to this challenge, hotels are looking to go beyond the pool and palm trees to create ‘Do you remember when...’ experiences.”

But, she says, the strategy doesn’t necessarily work at all hotels.

“The question that hotels need to ask is which types of locations and with which guest segments (do) these ideas really work, and where they do not work?,” she says.

Adam Weissenberg, vice chairman and U.S. leader of Deloitte’s travel, hospitality and leisure sector, says that offering experiences “could potentially build loyalty if they are interesting offerings to the guests.”

But he considers them more “ways to attract leisure customers on weekends to hotels, which are full during the week for business travelers.”

“I think this has always been the challenge for hotels,” he says. “They are just now coming up with more creative ideas.”