

Columnists

Originally published Friday, June 8, 2012 at 10:34 PM

Book a 'green' hotel for your summer trip

Take it to the bank: Reducing our environmental impact can actually save money for consumers, businesses or both. As we start the summer-vacation...

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Take it to the bank: Reducing our environmental impact can actually save money for consumers, businesses or both. As we start the summer-vacation season, "green" hotels provide a timely example.

In this case, it's mostly the hotels themselves saving big bucks by going green. But we all benefit, and hotel guests who enjoy a green lifestyle at home may appreciate being able to keep that going when on vacations or business trips.

Q: When we stay in a hotel, don't most of us just want comfort, convenience and a good rate?

A: Those basics take priority, and that's why many hotels have tried to make their green improvements as unobtrusive as possible. But as long as eco-friendliness doesn't seem like an imposition to guests, it can be a selling point for hotels.

Q: How do hotels save money with environmental upgrades?

A: Energy-conservation efforts provide the most immediate savings because a hotel typically spends more than 5 percent of its revenues just to pay energy bills. Thanks to equipment replacements, retrofits and adjustments, many hotels improve the efficiency of heating, cooling, water-heating and lighting systems without guests even noticing.

In just one year, the Marriott hotel chain saved nearly \$6 million by reducing energy consumption. Many electric utilities, including those in the Seattle area, provide financial incentives for hotels and other large businesses to make energy conservation improvements.

Q: What about the green changes that impact hotel guests more directly?

A: To curb water consumption, many hotels have installed low-flow shower heads and toilets or even dual-flush toilets. Because so many people have taken similar measures at home, most guests are comfortable with those features.

In a fairly radical step for the hospitality industry, some hotels have stopped providing small soaps and plastic bottles of toiletries to guests. For example, the swanky Davenport Hotel in Spokane has bulk dispensers for soap, shampoo and conditioner in the bathrooms and showers, resulting in significant cost savings and reductions in packaging waste.

Q: Why don't more hotels, especially green hotels, have recycling bins in the rooms?

A: Some green hotels find it more cost-effective (and less burdensome for guests) to have hotel staff or a recycling company sort certain recyclable items out of the garbage, rather than asking guests to separate their trash.

Q: What else makes a hotel green?

A: The greenest hotels even make changes that don't necessarily save them money, such as converting to cleaning products with less-toxic ingredients. These efforts are especially noteworthy because they may improve the health and safety of staff as well as guests.

Q: How do we know if a hotel is truly green?

A: Check hotel websites for descriptions of their green practices, but for verification, consult green-hotel certification programs.

Travelocity provides links to websites of 10 green certification programs that cover hotels (seati.ms/JOpr2K), from Energy Star to Green Key. The 10 listed programs require hotels to meet regulated green criteria and do not allow hotels to "self-certify."

Q: What can hotel guests do to make their visit as green as possible?

A: If staying for several days, don't have your sheets and towels changed every day. Turn lights off, and turn down heating or air conditioning when leaving the room. Bring your own reusable-water bottle and coffee mug when you travel.

If you take home those little soaps and shampoos from hotels and have a large collection, consider donating them to a charity that distributes them to residents of shelters or other transient people in need. Donate Seattle lists local organizations that accept those items (seati.ms/JvucZ5).

As an eco-conscious sensibility becomes more mainstream in American life, it only makes sense that anywhere we sleep should be green. If hotels can save money in the bargain, that's all the better. Enjoy your green stay!

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