

From keyless check-in to automated room settings and robot butlers, hotels are using technology to tailor their clients' stay. But this includes the personal touch too. Piers Wehner reports

Auto-ambience

The smart cameras identify you the second you enter the lobby. They note that you are a loyal and returning customer. The data swirls through the system in less than a second, producing an exact picture of who you are and what you want, from the preferred temperature of your bath water to how pampered you like to be in the spa. The headlines pop up on the receptionist's eye-screen. He smiles at you.

In your room a soothing voice says: "Welcome back, Dave," as the lighting, temperature and ambience

adjusts to suit you, and your favourite songs play quietly in the background. Unless, of course, all that really creeps the hell out of you, making you think of 2001: A Space Odyssey's Hal 9000. In which case, the receptionist would call to you, by name. The member of staff would show you to your room. You could fiddle with the lock and the light-switches to your heart's content.

Welcome to the hotel of the future. Jonathan Hubbard, chief executive, northern Europe, of JLL's hotels and hospitality group, argues that the future of hotels will be determined by two different factors: giving the customer a unique experience, but also giving the customer exactly what they want.

"Firstly, hotels are increasingly becoming places where people go for an experience. So you are going to see a lot more of those types of hotel," he says.

And some of those will be pretty weird. "There are some markets that can accommodate some extreme niches."

So should we expect a wave of underwater hotels? An eruption of pop-ups, in unlikely shapes and unlikely places? "People are increasingly looking for experience instead of use. It may not be financially viable, but that is not always going to stop things! As long as you make it good, you can be successful."

Alongside this brave new world, where the only limits are the laws of physics and your imagination (see box, right), there is the more prosaic question of what all the other hotels will be like.

"Are hotels really all going to be about 'experience' rather than the 'commodity' of a hotel?" asks Leisure Property Services director David Harper.

No, he states emphatically. "The key for people will be remembering the core values of the right type of service – and then guessing what we need, or reacting very swiftly to what we need."

Predicting that is hard. In the past ten years, for example, the acceptable size of a hotel room has become much smaller. In some budget hotels you have to pay extra for a window. Even at trendy boutique hotel Citizen M the rooms can

At a glance

- ✱ The Savoy in London was the first hotel to introduce en-suite bathrooms
- ✱ Room sizes at the Hilton have increased from 344 sq ft to 409 sq ft
- ✱ Smartphone check-in has been rolled out to 150 Starwood hotels
- ✱ Use of tablet interfaces in hotels has more than doubled in the past five years

be as tight at 15 sq m (161 sq ft). "That would have been unthinkable 10 years ago," says Hubbard. However, over the past 20 years, rooms at the higher end have become bigger, with a room at the Hilton swelling from 344 sq ft to 409 sq ft.

A recent survey showed that the most important thing in a hotel now, as far as guests are concerned, is connectivity. WiFi wins, not beds, or showers or TVs. "There is no way you could have predicted that in 2000," says Harper.

Even though connectivity is now important, facilities are also changing constantly, says Harper. "The first hotel with en-suite bathrooms was the Savoy in London, in 1889. People were shocked that anyone would want their own bathroom."

That was followed by The Goring, which made all its rooms en suite in 1910. Shampoo and soap were first introduced to en-suite bathrooms in 1970, at the Four Seasons on Park Lane. "See," exclaims Harper, "London is sometimes at the cutting edge of hospitality!" The Adolphus Hotel in Dallas was the first to install air conditioning in 1950, and minibars were first introduced to the now-defunct Hong Kong Hilton as late as 1974.

Things that were once seen as essentials – anyone remember the last time they used a trouser press? – are now obsolete, whereas former luxuries or gimmicks are now essentials, such as WiFi or power showers. Distinctions are



Yotel's Yobot is a robot concierge which can move luggage

increasingly blurring between budget and luxury, business and lifestyle, and that blurring will only increase.

So, for the vast bulk of the market, the focus will be on giving each guest exactly what they want.

"The trick is to predict what that will be 10 years from now, or 20 years," Hubbard says.

Tablets or iPads are now a familiar interface in many hotels, as their use by the public has more than doubled in the past five years. "But will iPads in bedrooms be replaced with something newer and shinier?" asks Harper. Who is to say that Apple's Watch, or Google's Glass, or something entirely different, won't consign them to the scrap pile?

Owen Pritchard, head of development at CBRE Hotels, says most big brands are looking seriously at new tech.

"There is a big focus on technology," he says. "They each want to ensure that they are future-proofed, aligned with younger demographics and, if they can be, ahead of the curve."

And this is being driven by the demands and expectations of the guests.

"Guests will expect facilities and services to be faster and more direct in the future," says Kirsty Perrin, an associate in Savills' hotel team. "And they will increasingly want to feel in control of their experience."

Already there are new technologies being introduced to aide this, such as

virtual check-in, iPad concierges, smart keys and interactive lighting controls.

"Some of these will become expected," Perrin adds. "Most guests now assume there will be free, high-speed WiFi, for instance. But other technologies will lean more towards the novelty."

At Yotel, for example, the Yobot is on hand to move guests' luggage. At some Starwood hotels guests have access to their own robot butler, or Botlr.

Some might see these innovations as mere gimmicks, or only advantageous as part of the experience offered by the hotel. "But a lot of these new technologies are for convenience rather than for technology's sake," says Perrin.

Starwood is one chain that values the impact of new technology more than most. The global giant, which includes the St Regis, W, Aloft, Westin and Sheraton brands, sees its hotels as "constant working laboratories" that allow it to test new technologies.

Its president of global development, Simon Turner, is on the panel of judges for the Radical Innovation in Hospitality award. But the aim, always, is to provide a more personalised experience for guests.

It may seem odd, then, that its most notable innovation has all but made the traditional reception redundant. In 2011,

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Starwood introduced RFID-equipped key cards, allowing guests to bypass the traditional check-in.

Last year, that evolved. In November 10 hotels trialled a system whereby, instead of a key card, guests used their smartphone to both check in and get into their rooms, with a signal from their phone activating the Bluetooth-controlled lock on their hotel room door. Far from being a gimmick, restricted to a handful of showcase hotels, this has now been rolled out to 150 hotels and 30,000 rooms in the portfolio.

"SPG [Starwood Preferred Guest] Keyless transforms the first interaction with our guests from one that is transactional to something more personal," says Starwood's president and chief executive, Frits van Paasschen. "This is just the beginning, because through the mobile we have the opportunity to transform the hotel experience in many exciting ways."

It may seem counter-intuitive to enhance customer relations by effectively making the reception redundant.

But Pritchard points out that this isn't what is happening. "They are liberating it. For customers who want that

ALL IN THE IMAGINATION

Trying to predict what will be created on the extreme fringes of the hospitality industry is pure imagineering. If you can imagine it, someone somewhere has probably pitched it as a hotel concept. Each year the Radical Innovation in Hospitality award asks architects and designers to do exactly that. Last year's winners included an eco-hotel for Beijing, which will also act as a pair of lungs for the polluted city; a hotel with changeable, 3D-printed interiors and augmented reality that interacts with the emotional states of the guests; a modular system of sliding pods that resembles an automated dry cleaners; and some prefab pop-ups colonising Sydney's abandoned monorail.

Previous winners have included a migrating pop-up hotel that used empty prime office space as its host; a hotel-bridge that could span any of the world's famous rivers; a floating hotel/ark; and a novel way to re-use oil rig platforms.

"Will the trendiness of some of these new hotels go out of date?" asks David Harper, director of Leisure Property Services. "Or will they need to keep reinventing themselves?"

experience, who like the traditional check-in, or who need actual assistance, it is still there." For those who don't, click, flick and you are done.

The key is convenience, says Savills' Perrin. "It is important that hoteliers recognise the purpose that technology serves and don't allow novelty to negatively impact the guest experience. There should be low-tech alternatives for guests who are less tech-savvy, and the technology must be reliable."

While Yotel has its Yobot, The Goring has just introduced a dedicated footman for each suite. "The budget end will be about technology and cost efficiencies," says Perrin. "The luxury end can afford to provide additional convenience through more staff. But both ends of the market are serving the same need."

Pritchard agrees that tech for its own sake is idiocy. "Even those who are very tech savvy want choice. The hotels need to guard against being too techie. You don't want to need a degree in engineering to operate the TV, do you?"

It isn't just the ability to open the door with a waft of the wrist that is putting this technology at the heart of the future of hotels.

Starwood's keyless tech is all part and parcel of its SPG platform. And that does something far more impressive than unlock a door. It remembers.

By gathering data on their guests, Starwood and its rivals are able to build up comprehensive customer profiles. Data can then be harnessed to tailor the experience to suit each guest exactly.

The applications of this are endless, but essentially it comes back to giving guests exactly what they want. Imagine a hotel chain that remembers not just what sort of room you want, but how warm you want it. Not just what time you have breakfast, but how you take your coffee. A hotel chain that makes sure that your shower is always that right temperature for you, your partner, and your kids.

For the leading hotel chains, this bespoke feel is the holy grail. "People will always want a more bespoke service," says Pritchard, "in the same way that people are always looking for new experiences."

Technology may well be the key to ensuring that the big chains provide what their guests want. But for those wanting an experience, the only constraint is the imagination.

"Some of those experiences may be very traditional," says Pritchard.

He adds: "But if hotels can offer something different, in terms of a location or a sleeping experience, if you could find a way to not need a bed, then who knows what we could be seeing in 10 or 15 years' time."



Starwood sees its hotels, which include the Aloft Bangkok, as "constant working laboratories"

HOTELS AS RETAIL OUTLETS

One curious trend emerging is the use of hotels as a shop window. Of course, that has been happening for donkey's years, with cabinets of trinkets a familiar sight in the lobbies of international hotels.

But recently this has evolved into something far more sophisticated.

When you stay in an Ace Hotel, for example, you aren't just invited to buy

items from the mini-bar, you can actually buy the mini-bar itself. Or the coin-tray by the door, or the blanket on the bed. Premier Inn is so convinced that you'll love sleeping in its Hypnos beds that it will sell you one to have at home.

In Stockholm and Las Vegas, and soon to arrive in London, according to Oliver Heywood, associate in the Savills' hotels

team, is the new platform Hoteletail.

"It aims to bring retail and hotels closer together than ever before," says Heywood. "The app and website allow guests to purchase items directly to be shipped back home. This can include artwork showcased at the hotel, local curios and products from the hotel gift and spa shops."