

Hotels *of the future*

Are robots at reception and room keys on our wrists just gimmicks or new service standards?
Elly Earls finds out

Cast your mind back 20, ten or even only five years and the thought of waltzing through a hotel lobby without so much as a 'hello' to the receptionist, opening the door to your room with your watch and thanking the robot that's just brought up your luggage with a hashtag while it does a celebratory dance (if and only if you gave it a five star review on its in-built touchpad), would probably have made you a bit uneasy.

Fast forward to the present, though, and these are things we're becoming more and more comfortable with. In fact, some properties have even gone one step further; the recently-opened Henn-na or 'Strange Hotel' in Japan, for example, is staffed almost entirely by robots, one an English-

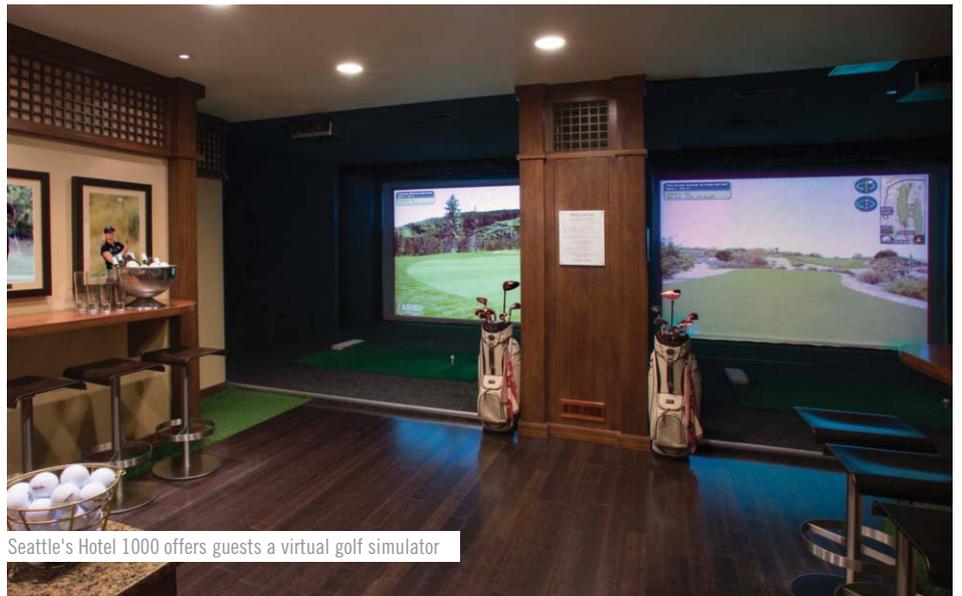
speaking dinosaur in a bowtie.

Now, don't panic too much – dinosaur-staffed hotels are very unlikely to ever become the norm – but all of this does bring up the question: if the 'Strange Hotel' exists now, what can we expect from the hotel of the future?

For Mona Anita Olsen, an entrepreneurship expert at Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, hotels that have gone to the extremes that the 'Strange Hotel' has, will increasingly have a market, albeit a limited one. "I would expect that there will be a target market for hotels completely staffed by robots. The focus on personal touch in hospitality is important, however as target markets continue to evolve, I think there will be a market for those who might not



A robotic butler is part of service at Aloft Cupertino in California. The hotel is opposite the Apple Campus



Seattle's Hotel 1000 offers guests a virtual golf simulator

perceive the personal touch as a focal point of their stay as they value the technology integration more."

'Strange' hotels becoming mainstream though? HOSPA CEO Carl Weldon FIH thinks not. "There will always be a problem with people dealing with people that aren't people," he believes. "On the other hand, Japan may be more automated than other countries. The culture of the place will dictate whether people take to [concepts like this] well or not."

Location is a factor in determining how great the emphasis is on technology. Yotel, one of the most tech-focused operators with its self-service check-in and robotic concierge YOBOT, originally used technology as a differentiator because its hotels were located in airports, while the operators of Seattle-based Hotel 1000 and Nine Zero Hotel in Boston both pride themselves on mirroring the technological innovation synonymous with these cities.

"At Nine Zero we want to make sure that we are taking that energy and push for innovation that surrounds us and bringing it inside the hotel," says general manager Michal Penek. The latest iris scanning system allows guests to enter one of the hotel suites, while Hotel 1000 offers its guests a virtual golf simulator and has infrared sensors in rooms to ensure they're never interrupted by housekeeping.

Let's get personal

Yet at none of these hotels has the personal touch been sacrificed in favour of technological gimmicks. Rather, technology has been painstakingly chosen to enhance the guest experience and make it more personal, something that will be absolutely critical to the successful hotel of the future -

'Strange' hotels excluded.

Indeed, Marcel Thoma, general manager of luxury boutique hotel The Upper House Hong Kong, summarises: "It's important to remember that technology supports human interaction, rather than replaces it."

A simple example is Yotel's friendly robotic concierge YOBOT, which, by helping guests with their luggage and stowing away their valuables, frees up the hotel's staff to focus on interacting meaningfully with their guests. "We know from our guests and from research that people do still want that element of personal service," says Yotel's marketing director Jo Berrington. "Yes, YOBOT is a machine, but it has a practical purpose. It makes the experience much quicker and easier for guests, and it allows the teams in our hotels to offer an amazing service because they're not running around dealing with bags."

Taking this idea to the next level, technology can also be used to capture data to make a guest's experience both seamless and personalised, the ultimate aim for hoteliers. "Just look at what Jumeirah has done," says Alan Christie, head of asset management for EMEA at CBRE Hotels. "Their whole aim is to provide a seamless experience, but not at the cost of guest interaction. Yes, you can check into your room in the limo en route to the hotel, but that also allows the hotel to know when you're arriving to the point that the doorman can open the door and address you by name, and the guest service attendant can meet you, also addressing you by name, and show you directly to your room. It's a seamless and very personal experience."

More and more hotels are also using >>>



Starwood's keyless service allows guests smartphone or Apple Watch entry



Guests use Google Glasses at LeDomaine Hotel in Spain

technology to compile information on guests' likes and dislikes - although care does need to be taken to get this right, particularly in luxury hotels. "Technology is only as good as the information inputted into it," believes Andres Araya, managing director at luxury Spanish hideaway Abadía Retuerta LeDomaine, which was the first hotel in Spain to trial Google Glass." For example, one guest told me he stayed with a major hotel group who diligently added his request for strawberry jam as his preference. Every time he booked in at properties around the world belonging to the same group, he was given strawberry jam and no alternatives. His initial request was just a spur of the moment thing, but suddenly, it was in the computer and he got it everywhere. The good intention backfired. You sometimes need to just talk to people rather than rely on outdated information."

For this reason LeDomaine has, alongside many up-to-the-minute technological features, introduced a butler service. "Our butlers reach out to guests prior to arrival to see if they can arrange anything for them to personalise their stay - it's all about communication and ongoing dialogue," Araya explains, adding that guests should be able to choose whether they want technology to be part of their stay or not.

Olivia Byrne, company director at London-based Eccleston Square Hotel, agrees. "If clients don't want to use our in-room iPad, they still have compendiums in the rooms as

well as a phone."

It's a similar story at Yotel. "If you want the interaction with the team at Yotel, you have it there, if you don't, perfect," says Berrington. "We have people that stay in airport hotels that we never actually speak to, but that's what they want."

Connectivity everywhere

Alongside personalisation, the other absolute essential for the hotel of the future will be connectivity. Indeed, it's what everything else will be built around, whether that's a keyless entry system, which allows guests to use their smartphone or Apple Watch as a room key, targeted F&B offers delivered to a guest's smartphone or in-room iPads.

Christie says: "If we as hoteliers are unable to replicate or even exceed the connectivity guests have in their own home, let alone their place of work, we'll only cause them frustration."

In fact, according to Bashar Wali, president of Provenance Hotels, the operator of Hotel 1000, which offers complimentary 1,000 megabit internet, the hotel room of the future should aim to emulate the living room of a guest today.

"Personal technology with its annual upgrade cycle has surpassed the in-room technology of most hotels," he explains. "Rather than spending endless money to catch up, the hotel should invest in technology that unlocks the guest's

personal device in the room. TVs should be smart enough to stream the media content of their choice, Wi-Fi should be free and fast, and there should be access to power outlets within an arm's length of the bed and desk."

Some groups will, of course, go one step further. "In the near future, guests will be able to control many aspects of their stay with the touch of their smartphone. They can already use it as a room key but soon will be able to set the temperature controls, dim the lights, even programme their morning coffee to brew before they wake," says Stephan Croix, vice president of marketing, EAME division at Starwood Hotels & Resorts.

Back to basics

However, there is still a lot to be said for keeping technology simple and practical. At Yotel, for example, guests often arrive jetlagged and disorientated, ready to fall into bed rather than navigate an endless stream of room controls. "For this reason, we've always tried to keep things really simple and easy to use and we still do," Berrington says. "Yes, you can have apps and iPads and tablets to control lighting, but the more complicated something is, the more potential it has to fail."

Christie agrees. "If we break it down into its simplest form, technology is supposed to provide efficiency and enhance our lives. We don't want to be wandering round the hotel room at 2am in the morning trying to switch off the lights!"

It's his belief, therefore, that some of the more complicated ideas are likely to be scaled back in the hotel of the future. "We'll probably see more of the home experience emulated," he predicts. "Technology will continue to play a key role in development and standard of offering through connectivity and truly enhancing the guest experience, while simultaneously allowing operators to gather as much information about guests as possible. But I also think we'll see a lot more back to basics. Technology needs to be practical and, in essence, timeless."

Gimmicks, of course, will always have their place, if only to provide a USP for a particular operator. Where else today, apart from Starwood's Cupertino Aloft hotel, can you expect a dancing, beeping robot called ALO to bring you your bag and encourage you to Tweet about the experience? And in which luxury Spanish hotel except LeDomaine is it possible to take an art tour of the property courtesy of Google Glass? There's certainly only one hotel where you can look forward to being greeted by a velociraptor receptionist. At least as far as we know. ■