

Investigating the secret life of a luxury hotel mystery inspector

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Dispatch is a series of first-person stories from the road. Readers can share their experiences, from the sublime to the strange.

As soon I enter my hotel room, before I even unpack, I drop to my knees and check under the bed for dust bunnies. Then I examine the walls and doors for scuff marks and the carpet for signs of debris. Next stop, the bathroom, to scrutinize the toilet seat, grouting, shower and floors for signs of dirt. No, I'm not an obsessive compulsive. I'm a mystery inspector for small luxury hotels.

Nice gig, you think? I have about 25 pages of questions I must answer about each hotel during my inspection. On my arrival I have already gone through about 50 questions on my check list. Now, imagine remembering all this when you're jet-lagged: Was I greeted at the door? Did the staff make good eye contact and use my name? Did the receptionist look well groomed? Was I immediately offered assistance? If the room was not ready, was I shown to the lounge and offered a complimentary drink?

Being a mystery inspector is not a vocation or a vacation. I am not paid for my inspections. Rather, I am reimbursed for my expenses at the hotel, and I must get there on my own dime. I only receive one night – two, if it's a remote location – to answer all the questions on the forms, and I'm kept very busy putting the hotel through its paces. I note everything, even if the floral arrangements are fresh. There's no time to rest.

Still not convinced?

At each hotel – as a minimum – I need to order room service, go to the bar for drinks, eat in all of the restaurants, receive a message left by someone outside the hotel, check out the public stairs, toilets, hallways and lobby, as well as my own room, test the Internet and the knowledge of the concierge, and order a wake-up call. If the hotel has a spa, outside grounds, a parking lot, a pool or a beach, all these must also be thoroughly evaluated.

When I call room service, I count the number of rings before my call is answered, time the delivery of my meal, test the temperature of the cold and hot dishes, and comment on the

quality and portion size. I watch for plastic wrap (a no-no) and time how long it takes my tray to be removed.

When I go to the bar, I expect a courteous greeting, a coaster placed under my drink, complimentary snacks that are replenished, and I check whether I'm offered a second drink before my first is entirely empty. Any slip-up is a negative on my check list.

Exhausted yet? I'm still not done. When I call the restaurant for reservations, they better pick up in four rings and handle my requests professionally in English. Upon arrival for dinner, I should be escorted to the table and asked if its location is acceptable. Of course, the meal, the wine service, the background music, the temperature of the room, the pacing of the dinner, the grooming of the staff and the lighting must all be above reproach.

I make notes on it all because these luxury hotels have high standards and are regularly scrutinized to make sure they haven't slipped

Recently, the association I work for expanded its inspection program – about 450 independent hotels now must be checked annually. That means more inspectors are needed. And even though we aren't paid for our time, the job posting for more mystery inspectors led to 1,500 applications. (When I signed up seven years ago, there were around 70 of us from 15 countries.)

Each year, inspectors bid on the hotels they wish to investigate. Cities such as Paris and London are popular, and I've found I never get all the hotels I bid on. However, if I'm lucky I might get two or three hot properties not too far away from one another and I'm able to string them together. In the past, I've signed up for hotels in destinations such as Istanbul, Riga and Wroclaw – fascinating cities I might have never visited without the mystery-inspector incentive.

So maybe I am lucky. My husband and I both love fancy hotels and enjoy being picky guests. If something falls short, we have immediate revenge when filling out the form. If things go well, we can reward the staff and hotel with a special notation.

Nothing beats getting repaid for living in luxury.

Send in your story from the road to travel@globeandmail.com
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