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CHECKING IN

Will Americans Accept Greener Hotel Rooms?

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

SEAN MacPHERSON, the New York hotelier, has been to Europe dozens of times. And he knows that across the Continent, many hotel rooms have master switches that help reduce power use.

Usually, a guest inserts a card into a slot when entering the room to turn on the electricity. Removing the card (which doubles as the room key) on the way out the door shuts off the power.

It is an easy way to conserve energy. Yet it is almost never seen in the United States. Guests who are in a hurry — or simply don't care about saving electricity — leave TVs, air-conditioners and lights on when there is no one in the room. Brian McGuinness, a vice president of Starwood Hotels and Resorts, explained the mind-set of some travelers: "Part of being on the road means the ability to live a little more luxuriously than at home, and that means not having to turn off the lights and the TV."

Mr. McGuinness added, "People say they want to be green, but they don't want to compromise." As a result, he said, "We don't really know yet what it means to be green in the hospitality field."

Last month, Starwood, which owns Westin and Sheraton Hotels, began a new "green" brand, called Element, which it bills as being eco-conscious and "kind to the environment," with ample natural light, in-room recycling bins and faucet filters meant to reduce reliance on bottled water. But so far, Element hotels do not have master switches in their guest rooms.

Mr. McGuinness, the executive responsible for the Element brand, said that before building the hotels, the company surveyed potential customers about energy-saving features, including master switches.

"Some," he recalled, "said they would suffer discomfort because they would get back to their room and it would be extremely hot." Others, he said, "indicated that entering a dark room could be a safety issue."

He said that future Element hotels might have a compromise master switch — one that controls the lights and the TV, while leaving the air-conditioning on.

Wen-I Chang, the developer of the

Gaia Merced — a hotel being built in central California with master switches — estimated the price of installing them at about \$300 a room, or less than one-quarter of 1 percent of the cost of construction.

Raefer K. Wallis, a Canadian-born architect living in China, helped design a hotel in Shanghai that is intended to be "carbon neutral." That meant giving the hotel, called URBN, energy-saving features, including master switches. But in North America, he said, hoteliers think: "Why run the risk of losing a customer because a room needs a few minutes to cool while the air-conditioning kicks in? It's better business just to run the A.C. and make sure the client comes back."

Mr. Wallis added, "North America just doesn't have the culture of saving resources."

But Mr. MacPherson said he thinks the mood in this country is shifting.

He and his business partner, Eric Goode, didn't install master switches at the Maritime Hotel, which opened in 2003, or the Bowery Hotel, which opened in 2007, both in Manhattan, believing that customers were not ready for them. But at their low-priced Jane Hotel, which opened last month on Jane Street in the West Village, they took the plunge.

At the Jane, the master switches are not controlled by key cards, which Mr. MacPherson said "seem impersonal and corporate."

"We wanted to do it in a more stylish way," he added.

So Mr. MacPherson had a metal shop make small brass cylinders, which he attached to each of the Jane's key chains. Place the cylinder into a slot near the door to your room, and the power goes on. Pull the cylinder out, and it goes off. Mr. MacPherson's team rigged the switches, he said, from standard electrical parts.

As recently as two years ago, he said, guests might have been put off by the enforced conservation. Now, Mr. MacPherson said: "The world has shifted. If you do the right thing, people pick up on it."

Another device, also common in European hotels, raises similar issues. It saves a lot of water, but also forces guests to think about how they use resources.



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A room at the new Jane Hotel in the West Village in Manhattan, above, is especially modest in size, but it does have a master key switch, right, that helps reduce energy use. Put the cylinder into the slot, and the power comes on. Take out the cylinder on your way out, and the power goes off.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA KRANTZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The device is a dual-flush toilet. Instead of one button to operate the toilet, there are two: one for a 0.8-gallon flush (for liquid waste) and one for 1.6 gallons (for solids). The toilets, which average just under one gallon per flush — as opposed to 7 gallons for some older toilets — are standard in much of the world.

But in the United States, even the Element chain has not installed them. Consumers expressed concern that the dual-flush toilets would not work, Mr. McGuinness said.

An American hotel that has tried the toilets, however, has reported no problems at all. In early 2007, Siegfried Richter, the manager of the Hilton Palacio del Rio in San Antonio, replaced more

than 400 toilets in the hotel with dual-flush models.

The idea came from the San Antonio Water System, which was looking for a hotel to serve as a model for its "kick the can" program to replace wasteful toilets. Mr. Richter jumped at the chance.

The toilets are made by the Australian manufacturer Caroma, and were installed as part of a project that also involved switching to low-flow showerheads. Since the change, water use at the hotel dropped by about a million gallons a month, according to Eddie Wilcut, conservation manager of the San Antonio Water System. Mr. Wilcut attributed about 60 percent of that sav-



Siegfried Richter, left, general manager of the Hilton Palacio del Rio in San Antonio, in one of its bathrooms. Water is saved by offering two flushing options for the toilet.

ings to the toilets.

The drop was so substantial that "the hotel thought its water meter was broken," he said.

According to Mr. Richter, there has not been a single customer complaint about the toilets.

Mr. Chang said the Kohler dual-flush toilets he chose for the Gaia at Merced added about \$80 to the cost of each room, which he described as a small price to pay.

Mr. Richter would like to see other hotels install the water-saving toilets. "We informed Hilton of our experience," he said. "But I'm not an officer of the company," he said, "nor do I have any great influence there."