

by *Chris_Barnett*

Not all hotels are taking a chainsaw to their room rates to lure or hang on to customers.

Choice Hotels International, hardly a marquee name in the hospitality world and one that caters to frugal business travelers and vacationers who can live without afternoon high tea and 900-thread-count linens, claims it isn't cutting prices to chase guests at its 5,800 hotels and motels worldwide.

With 10 folksy-sounding mid-priced and economy brands ranging from Comfort Inns to Cambria Suites to Sleep Inn and EconoLodge, Choice has persuaded its franchisees to "hold the line on prices," says Chief Marketing Officer Chris Malone. "And we haven't cut back on guest services." (But check with the hotel yourself for a deal).

Still, how can a chain of Spartan hotels and inns near the lower rungs of the hospitality ladder stand firm when better known, full-service names like Hyatt, Marriott, Sheratons and Hiltons are slashing room rates to fill empty beds?

Plenty of reasons. A San Francisco CPA named Brian "he didn't want to give me his last name" says the plusher hotels in major cities hiked their rates to the max during the gilded years when demand was robust. Then the roof fell in. Since they can't shrink capacity or re-route it to Copenhagen, many hotels will take whatever they can get that's reasonable, even if it stains their well-polished images and sends their barometer of financial health "revenue per available room or REV PAR" into the red.

For example, Brian says he recently paid \$240 plus taxes at Starwood's chic, sleek W Hotel in New York City's Union Square. That's a whopping nearly two-thirds cheaper than \$705 a night plus taxes that he shelled out before Wall Street and the economy collapsed.

(Want a real deal? The two-month old Westin Hotel in spiffed-up Jersey City, a 20-minute, \$1.75 train ride under the Hudson River from Manhattan's financial district, quoted me a king room with the ultra comfy "heavenly bed," \$169 a night, slashed from its rack, or retail, rate of \$579 a night. And that's without even buying blind on Hotwire or PriceLine).

Malone says another reason the 10 varieties of Choice Hotels isn't discounting is that business travelers are "trading down" to lower-priced lodging "either by, ah, choice or by orders from company headquarters "in survival mode." Their road warriors might go from a Courtyard by Marriott to a Comfort Inn or a Comfort Suites, which Malone calls an "upscale trade-down." Budget-minded vacationers and families, shopping price only, might choose a Choice brand if the rate is right and has freebies.

He also contends some of the Choice brands are picking up business meetings and small conferences looking to save money, and that travelers are switching from one brand to another to save loot and still earn points in the Choice Privileges loyalty program which

Not surprisingly, the 10 different brands are "segmented" is the hospitality industry buzzword each have their own free benefits, or "brand standards," but some overlap. And it can be a maze. All have free Internet access. Some have wired, some have wireless and Cambria Suites has both.

Cambria Suites, Clarion and MainStay Suites have "some form of a business center" at all locations. Comfort Inn, Sleep Inn, EconoLodge and Comfort Suites have some form of a free breakfast. Some brands have free local calls. Most have free parking, but not all.

Before you book, check www.choicehotels.com where each brand spells out what it offers. And that's not guaranteed. Some franchisers offer more or less so you can make a reservation on the website, but I'd double-check with the hotel itself to make sure what's promised will be delivered.

The Comfort Inn (www.comfortinn.com) in downtown Memphis, Tenn., greeted me with friendly voice twice. It has free wired Internet access in the rooms and WiFi in the "common" areas, such as the pool and exercise room, and a free serve-yourself full breakfast for \$119 a on Tuesday. But that's down from \$139 to \$149 a night from market downturn, I was told. Plus, parking is \$5.

At the Quality Inn and Suites at the Portland, Ore., Airport Convention Center, (www.qualityinn.com) rates are holding firm at \$105 a night. That includes a gratis hot buffet breakfast, pool, exercise room, wired and wireless Internet access, and parking at no charge. That's the same price charged last fall for a suite midweek. "Our business is very strong," said the receptionist.

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Barnett on Business Travel: Choice Hotels for budget travelers claim no discounting but check for deals by Chris_Barnett