

Barnett On Business Travel: Smaller hotels worth checking into

by *Chris_Barnett*

In New York City where a bargain-priced hotel room today is \$300 a night, Berlin advertising agency executive Stefan Richter has checked the quirky new place called The Pod. Some rooms are a minuscule 100 square feet, have bunk beds, shared bathrooms and rates starting at \$89 a night.

A flophouse in Hell's Kitchen? Far from it. The 347-room Pod (www.thepodhotel.com) has a prime midtown Manhattan location - East 51st between Second and Third avenues, free wireless Internet access everywhere, flat-screen TVs, I-Pod docking stations, kitschy art and gratis tequila tasting. It will soon have a rooftop wine and beer bar and indoor-outdoor lobby cafe. (Two-thirds of the rooms actually have private baths).

It's a mod-design makeover of the circa 1930 Pickwick Arms Hotel where I spent a night 30 years ago in a \$45 room with a bathroom down the hall.

Richter, creative director for the German ad agency Triad who's in New York with a co-worker planning Berlin Day on May 17, are not roughing it like I did. They aren't perched on bunk beds or sharing the loo with strangers. The Berliners booked queen-bedded rooms with private baths at \$230 a night and that is still \$200 a night cheaper than a basic room at the Hilton Garden Inn in Manhattan. The queen rooms normally fetch \$179 but New York City is busy in April and The Pod isn't above playing the age-old supply-demand pricing game.

He has no complaints. "The (Internet) communications works, which is very important to us. We're right in the middle of town and the staff is nice," reports Richter. Fine, but why would worldly business travelers consider a hotel that seems to cater to hipster 20- and 30-somethings on a budget?

The ad men didn't plan it that way. "We are working on this campaign," he explains, "for the mayor of Berlin who told us to 'check the Ritz' in the New York. But the Ritz was just unbelievably expensive. We found this hotel on the net and it looked good. I admit it's an experiment, but we're satisfied." (The Ritz-Carlton on Central Park South quoted me \$650 a night for a deluxe single with no park views.)

Hotel room rates are hardening in larger cities U.S. cities, with New York leading the charge, reports Smith Travel Research. But unless they're addicted to a chain hotel's frequent guest scheme or their company's travel policy dictates where they stay, more business travelers, particularly the growing ranks of the self-employed and entrepreneurs, are willing to take a chance in spruced-up vintage hotels if they're centrally located and don't gouge for the extras.

Los Angeles hotel rates aren't even close to New York but room demand is stiff because the entertainment industry is in a boom cycle. But shop it hard. The 281-room Los Angeles Sofitel (www.sofitella.com) at La Cienega and Beverly Boulevards, is 18 years old with a \$40 million makeover, a new spa, relatively new and sleek with a see-and-be-seen bar called the Stone Rose crafted by Rande Garber - best known as Cindy Crawford's husband.

I was given a \$300 night quote - plus you're slapped \$10 for the in-room Internet and another 10-spot for the WiFi in the lobby plus \$26 a night for parking which is no big deal. I haggled a bit and got it to \$270 a night but they would not waive the Internet fees and could not really defend the double dipping on net charges.

Yet the quiet, little, very contemporary 35-room Crescent Hotel (www.crescentbh.com) tastefully designed with an outside restaurant/bar and surprisingly attentive service for a boutique hostelry, starts at \$179 nightly. Built in 1929, it was said to be favored by stars of the silent screen, although the current owners have no history and can't name them. Most recently, it was known as the Beverly Crescent and was seedy before the renovation.

Still, it offers some solid value in a pricey town. There are with no Web access fees and somewhat reasonably priced libations. I grabbed a tab the other day for two hefty pours of Napa wine, two Heinekens, coffee and a couple diet Cokes and it was \$39. The small hotel's restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, dinner and has room service, though it's not 24-hour. Nice touch: an I-Pod in every room fully loaded with music. Downside: no fitness room but for \$20, you can get into the opulent Sports Club L.A.

Again, during my three-hour visit, I found the guest serving staff service very professional. But I didn't spend the night. A Beverly Hills mortgage banker, who checked in when his home air conditioning went on the fritz, says a siren went off at 2 a.m. and when he questioned the general manager the next morning about it, he says she was "dismissive." And with one person at the small front desk, a couple of phone calls went unanswered for an annoyingly long time.

I did get a genuine apology from the general manager.

Too many hotels are playing "deal or no deal" but here's a real find if you're headed toward Portland, Ore. The Mallory Hotel, built in 1912, has had a complete face lift and wardrobe makeover. Now called the Hotel de Luxe (www.hoteldeluxeportland.com), it looks like a Hollywood movie from the '40s. You have Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell looking over your shoulder. Delicate palms, chandeliers, tall columns, 24-hour room service and a curved bar called the Driftwood Lounge with leather upholstered banquettes and the ghosts of Louis B. Mayer and Bugsy Siegel no doubt floating through the room.

With all the modern gear and gadgets and the obvious trove of cash that's been sunk into the upgrade, I figured rooms would start north of \$200 a night easily. Big surprise: try \$139 a night.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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