

Barnett on Business Travel: An apology is music to a frustrated traveler's ears

by *Chris_Barnett*

If Madison Avenue ever opens a Catchy Name Hall of Fame, Embassy Suites has my vote. Each word conjures up visions of power, elegance, a private sanctuary for the well-heeled and well-connected. A place where diplomats hold back-channel conversations in total secrecy to free a political hostage or shore up a sagging currency.

Maybe that's why I tend to think - and often book - Embassy Suites when I need a refuge on the road. Sure, it's not a gated stone fortress with a black Bentley in the driveway and U.S. Marines standing guard; however, it offers a small furnished apartment for the price of a bedroom in a regular hotel, and there's a chef on duty in the morning to cook you a big breakfast on the house.

Embassy Suites, in fact, invented the idea of a two-room hotel room with a gratis hearty breakfast, originally for families traveling with kids. As the story goes, a Phoenix apartment builder named Chuck Sweeney was stuck with an empty building. Rather than lose his investment, he put in some basic furniture and rented out the apartments by the night, calling them Granada Royale Hometels, predecessor to Embassy. He was canny, too. The first time I saw a 32-inch TV was in an Embassy Suites on Maui.

But an overnight stay at the Embassy Suites in downtown San Diego a few weeks ago was disappointing - no, make that very frustrating. It started when I pulled into the tight driveway and there were no parking attendants in sight and no cashier in the little booth. I didn't want to just leave a new Enterprise Rent-A-Car Toyota there with the keys in the ignition. Turns out they were short a parking valet that day and the two on duty were shagging cars.

Inside, the front desk was well staffed, but with rookies who seemed like they were "playing hotel." No welcoming smiles or eye contact greeted me. The young woman who checked me in was positively stone-faced and greeted me in a monotone, while staring down at her computer. It went straight downhill from there.

She confirmed my rate of \$199 a night minus a 5 percent discount for AAA membership. When I asked about the Internet, she said it was \$10 a day. It seemed to me the Embassy Suites central reservationist said Internet access was free. After all, most of the midpriced hotel chains - Hilton Garden Inn, Wingate Inns, Best Westerns and some of the luxe hotels like Fairmont - have chosen not to nickel and dime travelers who need to work or get online.

Nope, she said \$10 was the tariff. Worse yet, Embassy Suites San Diego was wireless only. There was no simple high-speed, plug-in cable in the room. She said I could always use the business center's computers and Internet at no charge - a nice touch, but I didn't want to work in a glass enclosure in the lobby. I was also worried that my fussy IBM ThinkPad laptop might not pull in the hotel's WiFi signal and I'd really be in a

pickle.

Instead, she said I could rent a card, download some software and get online wirelessly. But that would be an extra \$100 block on my credit card on top of the \$250 block for the room. Fine.

The room was another disappointment. It was two-room suite but seemed smaller than most Embassy suites. The furniture was tired. It had a table, no desk, no desk light, no telephone on the table, no phone jack for dial-up Internet access and only a single wall socket underneath the table. In the age where travelers tote all sorts of electronic gear, such as computers, cell phones, BlackBerries and digital cameras, every hotel room should have a couple of power strips to power them.

Meanwhile, the TV remote control didn't work and then I couldn't get the wireless gizmo to work. I called down and asked for a technology expert but Embassy Suites has no one on staff to help guests in dire need of connectivity. Try this toll-free tech-support number, I was advised. No luck there. I asked the front desk for a 25-foot cord so I could move the phone across to the table and dial up the Internet. It would be slow, costly after the first 59 minutes, but at least I could work. Sorry, no long phone cords, said the front desk clerk.

Only then did I discover the room phone had its own long cord built into the wall. And after two hours of fiddling with the wireless card, I got connected, fixed the TV remote, received a free drink at the nightly two-hour manager's reception and finally worked.

To their credit, Embassy Suites management was very gracious when I reeled off the series of snafus. Without me having to ask, the genial and genuinely apologetic manager on duty subtracted \$50 from my room rate and deducted the \$23 overnight valet parking charge when I experienced a 20-minute delay trying to fetch my car.

General Manager Steve Holcomb telephoned to apologize and explained the San Diego Embassy Suites was about to undergo "extensive room renovations," which included upgrading the wireless Internet connections. I hope the term "upgrading" translates to quick and easy access.

Meanwhile, I am delighted to report that Embassy Suites' signature hot, cooked-to-order, all-you-can-eat breakfast at no charge hasn't been slimmed down by the corporate bean counters. That's a sweet deal.

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

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