

The Guest Inspector

AT SOME POINT DURING PAUL Watson's stay at a Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH) property, the retired communications executive gets down on his hands and knees. "My favorite place to look for dirt is in the corners," he says. He expects the hotel staff to refer to him by name, the operator to pick up before three rings and the bartender to make small talk when pouring a drink. "I look for the same level of service no matter where I go," he says. "It should hit me in the face."

Watson (not his real name) is not just an overly demanding hotel guest. He is one of about 175 volunteer travelers from around the world who have signed up for the Mystery Inspector program offered by SLH, a member organization of more than 500 independent hotels. In exchange for one or two nights on the house, the inspectors fill out a 32-page questionnaire, scrutinizing everything from the bellman's shoes to the bathroom towels. The once-a-year visits are anonymous, and usually coincide with a preplanned vacation because volunteers pay their own airfare.

Most hotel companies have some sort of undercover inspection process in place, or they hire an outside consulting firm to manage it, like Coyle Hospitality Group, which refers to guests as "weapons of choice." Feedback from guest inspectors is taken seriously. With SLH properties, for instance, if a hotel receives a bad report, another inspector is immediately sent out. If it fails the second inspection, the hotel goes in front of a trial committee. "We offer a six-month trial period for manage-

ment to get the hotel up to scratch," says SLH CEO Paul Kerr. "If that doesn't work, they can no longer be a member."

Sometimes the most well-thought-out recommendations come from real guests and not professional inspectors. David Morgan-Hewitt, general manager of the Goring in London, recalls how an SLH mystery inspector once recommended that an engineer leave a card when he has been in the room to fix a reported problem, like a leaky faucet. Morgan-Hewitt thought it made so much sense he implemented it immediately, instructing maintenance workers to leave a box of chocolates with their note. "People like to know you are on the case," he says.

No one had ever suggested before that maintenance workers make note of their repairs.

Serving as a guest inspector can be a great opportunity for travelers looking to save money. The luxury Red Carnations hotel chain invites between eight and 14 regular guests to a monthly roundtable dinner discussion in exchange for a \$70 voucher and a free night if the evening runs late. But guest inspectors shouldn't expect to just sit by the pool. "People need to know this is not a vacation," says Arcadio Roselli, chairman of the new-business-development committee for the U.K.-based International Mystery Shopping Alliance, which is looking for paid recruits to inspect planes, trains and rental cars, as well as hotels and cruise ships. "This is work. We want people who are willing to pay attention to a level of detail that not just anyone has." Even if it means getting down on hands and knees in search of dirt.

—SANA BUTLER



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