

What one hotel inspector looks for (there's an ick factor) and what one hotelier says about less-than-flattering findings

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Meet Inspector 63. Her job: evaluating hotels for AAA. Her expertise: extensive. Her gift to you: what she looks for in a hotel that can enhance your stay — or give you the willies.

Those diamonds you see in AAA reviews are the result of what she and many other inspectors do.

In an interview and in a follow-up email, 63 — who does not announce her visit beforehand and is identified only by number to ensure her anonymity — shared her 16 years of inspection experience and a decade of working for hotels.

Here's how 63 operates: She arrives at the hotel with a ratings format in hand and presents a business card. She is escorted to different areas — guest rooms, of course, but also common areas such as the hotel lobby and lounge. The exterior of the hotel also comes in for scrutiny.

Sometimes, the initial reception is one of alarm. The receptionist “is thinking we are the health inspector [and that] something is in violation,” she said. “The last thing we want to do is [have them] be fearful of us.”

But wouldn't you be nervous if someone were eyeballing your property by shining a light into dark corners? Maybe. We also spoke with a hotel manager to find out how — or whether — what an inspector finds makes a difference.

An inspector's perspective

Room cleanliness: Based on what inspectors look for, 63 said, here are good indicators (stuff you can look for too) that cleaning hasn't been thorough:

- ▶ Dust on picture frames
- ▶ Smudges on TV remote controls
- ▶ Fingerprints on light switches
- ▶ Gunk on telephone ear and mouthpieces. (Makeup can rub off.)
- ▶ A microwave with rust or an odor.
- ▶ Anything under the bed, if it's accessible (You might not want to look, depending on your bravery, but they do.)
- ▶ Lint in a hair dryer (Yes, it does accumulate, and you might want to check yours at home to be sure you're getting maximum airflow.)
- ▶ Vacuuming that falls short. Inspector 63 suggested looking in the corners where the vacuum has been. If the brush strokes don't extend all the way into the corner where the carpeting meets the walls, you may wonder whether other shortcuts have been taken.

Why carpeting isn't as prevalent as it once was: More often nowadays, you'll see laminate wood-look flooring, "luxury" vinyl tile or ceramic, porcelain or stone. "These finishes are easier to clean and maintain," she said. (I noticed this trend recently at a couple of beachfront hotels where I stayed — both had wood-look vinyl flooring on which sand showed up — and so did an earring I thought I had lost. Thumbs up on the flooring trend, at least in warm-weather climates.)

How mattresses and sheets are assessed without sleeping in the bed: Inspectors ask about the turning and replacement schedule of mattresses. They also strip guestroom beds to their bare bones to see for themselves. At the same time, they're looking at the linens to assess thread count, which can be an indicator of softness.

Trending tech: iPads and, yes, Alexa. Yes, that Alexa, your BFF who's always listening. But she may not be your BFF when it comes to service, 63 said. "Technology may not be as reliable while great hospitality and human interaction still very much go hand-in-hand," Inspector 63 said.

The hotel's perspective

“There’s always a role for inspectors like AAA,” said Janine Chicourrat, general manager of the Portola Hotel & Spa in Monterey. “I think sometimes their standards are unrealistic because of the design of the property, but by and large, I have always used their standards” as a suggestion for improvement.

For instance, if an inspection recommends that a room have a full-length mirror, this general manager, who has two decades of experience, pays attention and will try to find a way to incorporate that. “Ninety-nine percent of what they say makes sense,” she said.

Will social media or review sites render inspections obsolete? Chicourrat, who does pay attention to social media and review sites, doesn’t think so.

“Reviews on social media can be skewed, and they’re always opinion-based on likes and dislikes, whereas AAA is more fact-based.”

Time has not changed the value of facts. In arguing a court case in 1770, about a quarter-century before he became president, John Adams said: “Facts are stubborn things and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

Stubborn, yes, and useful, definitely, to help travelers make good choices.

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