



How safe is your hotel?

By Jayne Clark

Something about the guest room at the Westin Seattle didn't seem quite right. First, there was all of the computer equipment inside. The closet contained no luggage or clothing. The bed had been slept on but not in.

So the maid, responding to management's encouragement to report the unusual, alerted hotel security.

In the end, nothing was amiss. And, according to Westin, the guest expressed gratitude for the extra vigilance.

Still, the incident speaks to the changing nature of hotel security in a time of terror alerts.

Hotel security traditionally has focused on theft, fire and natural-disaster contingencies. Now, as "soft targets," in the parlance of the Department of Homeland Security, hotels are grappling with new concerns. And though some — primarily large, upscale or luxury properties and those that cater to business travelers — already had ratcheted up safety plans after Sept. 11, some security experts question just how far the industry is willing to go, or indeed *can* go, to prevent terrorist incidents. As large, open spaces with multiple entrances and lots of people moving through them, hotels are difficult to secure. Moreover, in a time of flagging occupancies and revenue, some may be reluctant or unable to spend on improvements. And it's unlikely the sort of extreme measures now standard in the nation's airports would fly in hotels.

Though major chains have become better at controlling access in recent years by limiting entrance through exterior doors to guests with key cards, for example, "most hotels have very little perimeter control," says Bruce McIndoe, head of iJET Travel Intelligence, a travel-risk-management company. "Some have stepped up their surveillance systems. But they're loath to be spending gazillions of dollars on extraordinary measures."

Accustomed to selling service and amenities, the industry has been slow to focus on safety and security, some analysts maintain.

"Generally, measures are not up to what they could be," says Peter Tarlow, president of the security consulting firm Tourism and More. "I think more and more people are

questioning how safe they feel in hotels. And if there were, God forbid, more than one attack at a hotel, those who do feel safe, wouldn't."

Adds John C. Fannin, head of Wilmington, Del.-based SafePlace Corp., which has devised a safety accreditation program for lodgings: "It isn't that they've made the conscious decision *not* to (improve security). It's that they haven't made the decision to do it. The industry shifts gears slowly. And I think they're behind the curve, given current events."

Still, a Cornell University survey assessing staffing and procedures in the days after 9/11 vs. one year later showed the number of hotels adding security staff and altering safety procedures "a great deal" had about doubled.

"We found they'd gotten with the program," says Cathy Enz, director of the Center for Hospitality Research at the Cornell Hotel School. "Staffing and training has escalated. They've started looking at processes."

For the most part, U.S.-based hotel chains decline to discuss their security routines, not wanting to tip off the bad guys and perhaps desiring to distance themselves from unpleasant scenarios. Starwood Hotels & Resorts, parent of the Sheraton and Westin chains, has increased security with the elevated terror government-issued alerts, particularly at its large, urban locales. Measures include more vigilance at entrances, loading docks and in hotel garages, and more scrutiny of unattended bags and cars. Armed guards are stationed at some properties. And at the highest alert level, member hotels will no longer store luggage, says spokeswoman K.C. Kavanagh.

A Marriott spokesman says the chain's security measures are aligned with Department of Homeland Security threat conditions. Procedures may include identification and vehicle inspections, and increased security at entrances.

In Las Vegas, major hotel-casinos also have increased security levels, which were heightened after Sept. 11. (Tarlow notes that casino hotels already had the tightest security because "they can't afford to mess up. There's too much money involved.")

The explosion in a crowded resort area in Bali, Indonesia, in October that killed 190 people, most of them Australian tourists, and a terrorist bomb that killed 14 at a hotel near the coastal resort of Mombassa, Kenya, in November demonstrate that tourist enclaves can indeed be soft targets for terrorists. After the Bali bombing, the trade publication *HOTEL Asia Pacific* surveyed more than 300 international hotels (almost 60% of respondents were in the Asia Pacific region) and found that one in three hoteliers had concerns about safety on their properties. But 60% had not increased their security budgets.

At the time, the magazine's editor and survey organizer, Steve Shellum, called the lack of action "not just scary, but an indictment on the industry." In the three months since the

survey was released, he believes the level of security awareness is up, but bottom lines may prevent hotels from acting on that awareness.

It's impossible to calculate the risk of terrorist attack on a U.S. hotel, because there has never been one. But the average American's chance of being killed by a terrorist in a given year is 1 in 9.3 million. Better to worry about being mugged on the way into the hotel than dying in an assault there, says David Ropeik of Harvard University's Center for Risk Analysis.

But, he adds, security concerns "don't have much to do with the hotels or the facts. People's fears are fueled by the psychological *perception* of risk," which is why they built bomb shelters during the Cold War and why they're stocking up on duct tape now.

Even those who favor instituting greater security concede that doing so, even in times of high anxiety, means walking a fine line between reassuring and scaring guests. "If you put a ring of armed guards around a hotel, you're going to drive away the tourists before you drive away the terrorists," says Ted Silverman, marketer for the Israel-based security consultant Shafran.

Still, hotel guests in some of the world's trouble spots have become inured to overt security. Metal detectors are standard equipment in some places where bombings are frequent. And in Israel, the government is making gas masks available free or at a discount to guests. But McIndoe says such trappings would likely be more disconcerting than helpful in the USA.

Tarlow disagrees. "Most guests in today's world do not get alarmed by security. They like it," he says. "I constantly see a correlation between good service and good security."

Short of becoming fortresses, there are steps that even hotels in high-risk areas can take, security experts agree. Fannin says hotels should be assessing their vulnerability, instituting contingency plans and training staff to execute them. Short of that, he says, they should at least be closing access to non-public areas, including ventilation and water supply systems. Among other measures: requesting positive identification at check-in, restricting access to guest floors and refusing to store bags of non-resident guests.

The Sept. 11 attacks signaled a change in the industry's attitude toward security issues, says Chester Doty, security chief for Asia-based Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts. "Before 9/11, security was an unwanted stepchild of the hotel industry because it did not make money. Now, all that has changed, and security is right in the spotlight."