



Consumer Alert

Hidden camera investigation uncovers security gaps

By Lea Thompson

Dateline NBC

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People come and go at hotels and few even think about security. They assume they're in a safe haven, a home away from home. Then why is a man, who has no business being in a hotel monitored by Dateline, able to wander through hallways in the middle of the night? It happened over and over again.

For the first time in history, there are more women business travelers than men, making safety in hotels more critical than ever before. Even at some of the most luxurious hotels in the country, intruders, unwittingly helped by hotel employees, are breaching security and getting very close to where you might be sleeping.

It might sound farfetched, but not to the women Dateline spoke with. Dateline launched a hidden camera investigation to address the issue of hotel safety.

The hotel industry says it has tightened security, with things like computerized locks and hi-tech surveillance cameras, and it is true the vast majority of people stay in hotels without incident each year. But Dateline discovered that all the technology in the world might not be enough to protect you if hotel employees aren't properly trained.

John Fannin has managed security for major corporations. He owns "Safeplace," a company which independently tests and certifies hotels for safety.

Lea Thompson: "Should people be concerned? Is there a problem with hotel security in this country?"

John Fannin: "Yes, there definitely is."

It is nearly impossible to know just much hotel crime there is each year. Experts say hotels often settle claims quietly and never report them, and the American Hotel and Motel Association says it does not keep statistics on hotel crime, nor does the FBI. Security experts say theft appears to be the biggest problem.

One victim was Margaret Gow, a computer seminar instructor on the road with expensive equipment three weeks every month. One day in 2001, she was setting up in a second floor conference room at a Holiday Inn in northern New Jersey.

In the hallway, caught by the hotel's security camera, she is approached by a man she thinks works for the hotel. He has an unusual request. He says he doesn't speak English well and needs her assistance at the front desk.

Gow: "He wanted me to come with him, and I'm very hesitant. I thought it was only going to be a brief minute. Surely, nothing could happen in that time period."

She is downstairs at the front desk with him for just a few moments before she returns to the conference room.

Gow: "I just felt like something wasn't quite right. And I walked in thinking to myself, please God, let the computer still be there. And it wasn't."

The video tells the whole story. As one man keeps her busy at the front desk, other men enter the conference room as if they own the place and walk away with her equipment: a good suitcase, two credit cards and her personal computer.

Gow: "I come out and I'm just frantic, because I can't believe what's happened. It's an unreal feeling. It really is."

According to police, the gang who robbed Margaret is still out there. Fortunately, they're just thieves.

Fashion rep Ava Taner stayed at the trendy Paramount Hotel in New York City's Times Square in February 2000, because she'd heard it was hip. But when she got there, something about the place made her uneasy.

Ava Taner: "I didn't like the way it was laid out. The hallways are very dark and dingy."

One evening, as she returned to the hotel to freshen up for dinner, she stepped into an empty elevator and pressed 12.

Taner: "Just as the doors were closing, these two guys jumped into the elevator. And the elevator started moving. But they didn't press a floor. So, I said to them, 'What floor do you want?' And they said, 'We want the same floor you chose.' Well, that's not impossible."

They got off at the 12th floor, just Ava and the strangers.

Taner: "I'm a little nervous at this point, because there's absolutely nobody on the floor. Nothing."

She says she hesitated a moment, then headed for her room. The minute she put her key in the lock, one of the men grabbed her and shoved her inside.

Taner: "He was twisting my neck like this. And I heard a click. My knee gave way and I sort of fell to the floor saying, 'Oh, my God, I'm paralyzed. If I'm not going to die, I'm paralyzed'."

Thompson: "Did you think he was going to kill you?"

Taner: "Yes, I thought he was going to kill me because he was trying to strangle me."

The men forced two rings off her fingers and then fled, leaving Ava in excruciating pain. That snap in her neck was her jaw dislocating.

Taner: "I was totally terrified, screaming bloody murder. But nobody came to help. There was no security people that came to my room. There was nothing."

It was similar at the Westin Bonaventure in Los Angeles. One Sunday morning in 2001, a man followed a young flight attendant to her room and pushed her in. Another flight attendant, Kathy Durst, was down the hall, heard her scream, and called the hotel operator for help. Kathy was surprised by what she says was the operator's response.

Kathy Durst: "She was coming off as unconcerned. Or thinking that, OK, you heard a scream. Big deal."

Kathy says she waited for help, and then called again. And yet again. Forty minutes went by.

Thompson: "Did security ever come?"

Durst: "Never."

Not until the victim stumbled from her room naked and made it to the lobby were police finally called. She had been raped. Records would later show the hotel operator and a security guard joked that the victim may have screamed because she'd seen a cockroach. No security guard ever went upstairs to investigate.

Thompson: "Are you angry?"

Durst: "Sure. It did not have to happen."

So why did it happen? Dateline set out to investigate security at hotels across the country, from the front door right up to what could be your room.

The hotel industry says it has spent a fortune adding computerized room keys, locking elevators and hi-tech video surveillance, all to protect you. But security expert John Fannin says the training of hotel employees has not kept pace with the hardware.

Thompson: "Is hotel security better than it was, say, 10 years ago?"

John Fannin: **"I think hotel security has changed very little. I think the majority of the lodging industry is, from my perspective, frozen in time."**

So where are gaps in hotel security? Dateline took hidden cameras to nearly 30 hotels in this country, luxury, mid-priced and those along the highway, including some where we knew terrible crimes had been committed against guests. In every one we were able to gain access to parts of the hotel we had no business entering. And we're not going to tell you anything the criminals who work hotels don't already know. What we found is that most breeches in hotel security have to do with human error, and they often start right at the front desk.

We found it can be easy to get personal information about guests, like room numbers.

Fannin: **"You immediately are at risk, if your guest room is known by anyone other than yourself."**



WHAT TO ASK WHEN YOU BOOK A HOTEL

Provided by SafePlace www.safeplace.com

Regardless of property type, it is important to be sure that your hotel considers your safety to be as important as you do. Here are some sample questions to ask when booking a hotel stay.

- Is the hotel SafePlace Accredited? If yes, you know that specific security, fire protection, health and life safety features are present and have been independently verified.
- Are criminal background checks and drug tests performed on every employee?
- Is every guest room equipped with smoke detectors?
- Is the building protected throughout with an automatic fire sprinkler system?
- Is every guestroom door equipped with keycard entry and deadbolt locks?
- Does each guestroom door have a view port (one way "peep-hole")?
- Is there a well-trained security staff on site 24 hours a day?
- Does the hotel have a safe where I can store my valuables?
- Does the hotel have non-smoking rooms?
- Has the hotel made provisions for the disabled?

Thompson: "How so? Why are you at risk?"



IMPORTANT HOTEL SAFETY TIPS

- Always leave a travel itinerary with someone at home, a relative or trusted friend.
- Always avoid ground floor and other rooms easily accessible from the outside of the building.
- Before boarding an elevator, observe all passengers. When returning to your room, board last and/or be last to select your floor button. Always position yourself near the elevator control panel. If threatened, press the alarm button and as many floor buttons as possible.
- When entering your room for the first time, have the bellman remain while you perform your room security check.
- If there is an adjoining room, ensure that the door locks via deadbolt accessible only from inside your room.
- Do not place the in-room breakfast menu on your door at night. This sends a clear message that there is a single person in the room.
- Do not travel with expensive jewelry or large amounts of cash. If you must bring jewelry, use of the front desk safe deposit box is preferred.
- Place the "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door. The sign gives the impression you are in the room when you are not. Call housekeeping for maid service - instruct them to leave the sign on the door. Do not use the "clean the room" sign.
- Make it a habit to pack and place a small flashlight on your nightstand in case of a power outage. It is very dangerous to stumble around an unfamiliar building in the dark.
- Do not stay in a hotel that is not equipped with automatic fire sprinklers throughout and guest room smoke detectors.
- Locate fire exits; be able to recognize the fire alarm signal, and plan your actions in the event of a hotel fire, such as counting the number of doors from your room to the fire exit stairwell.
- When you leave your hotel room for the day or evening leave the television on. From outside the room it sounds like the room is occupied.
- Never prop your hotel room door open. Only open your door to individuals known to you. An unexpected visit from "hotel staff" should be verified with the front desk before opening your door.
- If you are a woman traveling alone, when walking to your car from the hotel at night, ask for a security guard to escort you to your vehicle. When you return to the hotel, have them valet park the car.
- Be observant to unusual or questionable people or activities.

Fannin: "Because now I know where you're staying. I know what floor you're on, I know what room you're in. So you're easily pursued."

Fannin says hotel employees should be taught never to say a guest's room number out loud, though many do. But the front desk isn't the only way a criminal can get a room number. There's a handy tool: the house phone.

Thompson: "If somebody can find out your room number, say, on a house phone, what can they do with it?"

Fannin: "**Well initially, they can charge meals, go to the bar. Probably more significantly though, is the fact that they would know where you're staying and be able to potentially profile you, stalk you.**"

On a positive note, Dateline found most hotels were careful not to give out room numbers over the house phone. But at the Atlanta Hilton, one of our producers was able to get a guest's room number from a hotel operator.

And at New York's posh Waldorf Astoria, it was easy to get a doctor's name from his convention name tag. Posing as the doctor, a Dateline producer pretended he had forgotten his room number. At first the operator was reluctant. But after a few minutes she relented.

It was also at the Waldorf where, late at night, an employee actually went out of his way to help our producers. They were not guests of the hotel, but he showed them how to use the freight elevator to get to the exclusive guest

tower.

But why even bother with finding a back route? The front elevators are usually wide open.

Thompson: "If a crook can get on an elevator, what can he do?"

Fannin: "Once on a guestroom floor they have access to guestrooms and when they do they have access to you as an individual."

Some hotels have elevators with locks, so that if you don't have a room key, you can't get upstairs. How well did they work? Time and time again, hotel guests helped our producer get to the upper floors. Not once did a guest ask a question like, "where's your key?" or refuse to push a button.

Thompson: "Are we sometimes our own worst enemies?"

Fannin: "We are certainly contributing to our risk. It's almost as if we leave our common sense at home. We pay for a hotel room and we believe that we're getting a completely secure environment. And, in fact, it may not be any more secure and in some cases could be less secure than the place we left."

Fannin says travelers can't take hotel safety for granted. Even when there's a guard at the elevator bank assigned to check keys, you're often on your own. In some cases, we walked by security guards, unchallenged, get on elevators and then onto guest room floors. At the Trump Plaza in Atlantic City one guard acted tough. Still, people were walking onto elevators without guards checking for keys. We were able to easily distract this guard.

In one case a man never showed a key -- just an envelope the hotel uses to hand out keys, which are readily available for anyone to pick up. We did, and waved it as we passed a guard, never actually having a key inside.

And terrible crimes have been committed in hotels when criminals have easy access to the upper floors.

The Atlanta Hilton's surveillance video records as a man casually walks right into the hotel in 1998. It's midnight and he heads on up the elevator. He is on his way to rob three people who are total strangers. He will kill them execution style, steal their football tickets and then stroll off with a suitcase.

This happens just days after he committed an armed robbery and a double murder in two different Atlanta hotels. But Dateline did find some guards doing the right thing to protect hotel guests, like one at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, who would not let us by without a key.

Good for him, but his colleagues weren't so cautious. After chatting with our undercover Dateline producer for a few minutes, one guard volunteered something that would have been extremely helpful if we were up to no good -- the staff list, with the names and number of guards on duty that night. And he also didn't stop our producer from going upstairs. He easily found his way to the high roller floors, where he didn't belong.

How critical are well-trained security guards? Remember that rape of a flight attendant at the Bonaventure in Los Angeles? The rapist is now serving 30 years in a California prison. He says he went to a party on a guest floor of the hotel the night before the rape, left the party at 4 a.m. and then just walked the halls of the hotel for more than six hours.

Thompson: "After the party was over that night, did any guard ask you what you were doing when you were wandering around the hotel?"

Inmate: "No."

Thompson: "You could go anywhere you wanted to go in that hotel."

Inmate: "Basically."

The rapist says at ten the following morning, no guard was watching as he followed the young flight attendant to her room, pushed her in and raped her.

Thompson: "If security had showed up right away, would it have stopped this rape?"

Inmate: "Yes."

Three years later, we also wandered the guest floors of the Bonaventure for hours, unchallenged. Not only there, but also at the Atlanta Hilton, the Atlanta Hyatt, and at New York's Paramount.

Getting to a guest floor is one thing, but could we get into a room?

Experts say computerized key cards are a major breakthrough in hotel security. These keys are nearly impossible to copy and are changed every time a guest checks out. Nearly every hotel has them. But there are a few hold outs - like the Paramount in New York City, where the keys are still metal -- easily duplicated. That, according to expert John Fannin, can be risky.

Thompson: "Some hotels think metal keys are retro and cool."

Fannin: "It doesn't make them safe."

Fannin says any hotel using brass keys should change the locks regularly, especially if a guest checks out without returning the key. We rented rooms at the Paramount and deliberately held onto the keys after we checked out. Would the hotel realize the keys were missing and change the locks? We returned a day later to find out. We didn't want to enter a room that was no longer ours, so we asked a hotel employee to try the lock using that key we'd held onto.

We had no trouble getting in because the lock hadn't been changed. Had we been criminals, we could have walked right in.

But when it comes to breaching security, we're amateurs. We spoke with Doug McGaughey, a security consultant who's tested building vulnerability for the U.S. government. Dateline hired him to see what gaps in hotel security he would find.

We went to several hotels, including the Atlanta Hilton, where one man committed a triple murder. We always had a female producer check in. Could Doug get in? Most maids at the hotels wouldn't let him in, but all it takes is one. He tells housekeeping that he has left his key in his room. Now all he has to do is wait for the guest to return.

In our investigation we got information on room numbers, we got past guards, up onto elevators and finally, we gained access to guest rooms. In the end, it seemed, it wasn't whether hi-tech security equipment worked. It was whether hotel employees were watching - whether they were doing their jobs. It all came down to the human factor.

Hotels respond to claims of security gaps

What do the hotels have to say about this? Rick Santoro, head of security at the Trump casinos in Atlantic City was disturbed by some of what we found, but says violent crime in his hotels is virtually nonexistent. He says Trump casinos have an extensive hidden security network of undercover guards and hi-tech equipment you can't see.

Still, he says his uniformed guards are trained to be friendly and sometimes that means an occasional intruder will get upstairs.

Rick Santoro: "Our guests want security, but they don't want it restrictive enough that it really impedes your ability to move about freely. So we balance that."

John McInerny, president of the American Hotel and Lodging Association agrees.

Thompson: "We were able to get on to guest floors in every hotel we went to. Does that concern you?"

Joseph McInerney: "Yes, it does. It does concern me. But again, it's the security issue. Do you want to have an armed camp? Or do you want to have a place that people feel like they're enjoying themselves, and they have the freedom."

McInerney says the number of people who stay in hotels each year speaks for itself.

McInerney: "There's roughly 45,000 hotels in the United States, 4 million guest rooms. Every night, 3 million people sleep in those rooms."

Thompson: "Are we scaring people unnecessarily? What are the chances that someone is really going to be harmed in a hotel?"

Fannin: "**You showed me a series of incidents that you were able to complete, in lodging facilities that you chose at random. So I think they indicate that there is an issue in the industry that needs to be addressed.**"

A small percentage, yes, but just how small? McInerney says there's no way of knowing because the industry doesn't keep statistics.

Thompson: "Why is it that nobody keeps track of hotel crime?"

McInerney: "I have no idea, I really don't. It's not been one of the statistics that anybody was ever very interested in."

Thompson: "Is this a case of, if we don't know the numbers, we don't have to talk about it?"

McInerney: "No, I don't think so."

The other hotels in our story declined to comment on-camera. But in a written statement the owners of the Westin Bonaventure say they strive to protect guests, and the number of incidents at the hotel is low considering the millions of people who visit each year.

Owners of the Paramount Hotel say they "regret what happened to Ava Taner and are passionate about guest safety." They note the hotel's quick response in the Taner case led to the capture and conviction of one of her assailants. In court papers, the hotel denies liability and says Ava was in part to blame. Ava disagrees. She says the attack could have been prevented and she is suing the Paramount for \$10 million.

Hilton Corp. says safety, security and comfort are the highest priority at the Waldorf Astoria and all of its hotels. Because of security concerns, it did not detail its safety measures but says consumers can't always see them.

Survivors of the murder victims in the Atlanta Hilton recently settled with the Hilton chain for an undisclosed sum. The Hilton did not admit liability. The woman who was raped at the Bonaventure recently won a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the hotel. The Bonaventure admitted liability in that case.

Thomson: "John, security costs money. Hotels are in a tight squeeze right now. Are we asking too much?"

Fannin: "**I don't believe we're asking too much. Consumer pays money for comfort and security. And both of those things are the responsibility of the hotel. Not every security feature a hotel provides necessarily requires that they spend money. It may be merely the proper training of their staff.**"

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[Next →](#)

Consumer Alert Section Front

- In pursuit of the almighty dollar
- Mid-size side impact crash tests
- Hidden cameras at top 10 fast food chains
- How do your local restaurants rate?
- Restaurant chains respond to our report
- Lea Thompson brings you behind the story
- Car sales: Tricks of the trade
- ATM fraud: Banking on your money
- Child safety seats under scrutiny
- Keeping thieves from your car keys
- Consumer Alert Section Front