



Thinking of hotels as small cities

As a woman who often stays in hotels while covering stories, correspondent reflects on lessons learned

By Lea Thompson

Reporter's Notebook

Dateline NBC

Updated: 2:42 p.m. ET June 06, 2004

As a Dateline correspondent I travel a lot. Sometimes we stay in very nice hotels with all the amenities and what seems like a lot of security. But we go where the story is, so we often stay in hotels in very small towns or, as we say in our story, "hotels along the highway."

After spending a year working on our hotel security investigation, two things really stand out for me. One, it doesn't seem to make a difference how fancy a hotel is when it comes to safety - we found security problems at the big hotels and we found them at small ones. Two, there is a whole lot more crime in hotels than I think any of us ever imagined.

So, why isn't this something you have heard more about? Well experts we talked to both in and out of the hotel business say it is not in the hotel industry's best interest to tell you about crime. Our experts point out it is not good for business. Why would you stay in a place if you knew the week before there had been a violent crime committed or a number of guests had lost all their belongings?

One of the hardest things to get a handle on for this story was how much crime there is in hotels. Mary Ann Rotondi, the producer of this story, and Justin Smith, the Associate Producer, spent months searching for statistics nationally and locally, in many cities in this country. They found the hotel industry doesn't keep any and the FBI doesn't break it down but, anecdotally, we all heard about terrible incidents and a lot of theft. Is it much, considering the millions of people who stay safely in hotels every year? Well, if it is you that is being attacked or you who lose all of your luggage or your computer, then any crime, I guess, is too much crime.

One of our experts told us you have to think of a hotel as a small city. As he points out, hotels, by their very nature, are open spaces where people come to socialize. Hotel employees who are supposed to be trained to protect you are also trained to be friendly and open. There are a lot of parties going on in hotels, there is a certain amount of drinking - so, hotels become a magnet, in some ways, for thieves.

This story has certainly convinced me I need to watch my back much more than I have in the past. I pay attention if the desk clerk calls out my room number - I really do ask for another room. I stand by the control panel when I get in the elevator so I can see who is going where. Just last week I got off the elevator early because a guy, who made me uncomfortable, pressed the same floor I was originally going to.

I flick on the light before going into my room, I bolt my door, I would never let anyone claiming to be a hotel employee into my room without calling the front desk to see why they were there.

And, when I give a speech or something, I take off my name tag when I leave the convention floor.

I used to casually leave bar tabs or dining room tabs on the table with my name and number on them. I don't do that anymore. And none of us at Dateline call out our room numbers to each other in public places or in a crowded elevator.

Have I become paranoid about hotel security? No, but I do realize a woman traveling alone is a target and, having had the chance to talk to too many women who were attacked in hotels, I am aware of who is around me and I do take a whole lot more precautions than I used to.

Kudos on this story go to all those Dateliners who spent nights and weekends prowling the floors and freight elevators and stairways of our nation's hotels with hidden cameras. They didn't get to stay in the stately rooms in places like the Waldorf Astoria -- they only got to look at rows of rooms in the middle of the night. Justin Smith, Rayner Ramirez, Victor Arango, Charmaine Lewis, Joyce Cordero, Karen Epstein and Anthony Galloway, thanks so much. Mary Ann Rotondi rode herd (she is from Montana) over this enormous project. She is a marvelous journalist and dogged reporter.