

The New York Times

November 25, 2003

BUSINESS TRAVEL

Women Help Hotels Adjust Their Security

By PATRICIA R. OLSEN

In a 2002 survey by John Portman & Associates, a hotel-architecture firm in Atlanta, only one of five female executives described security as their most important consideration in choosing a hotel. Yet 75 percent wanted screens in their rooms showing who was outside the door and 84 percent said they would like to have panic buttons on the wall to alert the front desk.

In that seeming contradiction lies an enduring reality: no matter how sophisticated women traveling on business might have become about looking after themselves on the road, they can never shake their trepidation about being alone in an unfamiliar locale. And with women representing more than half of all business travelers, the hotel industry is redoubling its efforts to reassure them.

Late last year, for example, the Hamilton Crowne Plaza in Washington began offering a women-only floor, a feature popular in hotels in Asia. The Women on Their Way program of Wyndham Hotels, which has been catering to female business travelers since 1995, polls women business travelers each year. The latest findings indicate that they want to know other women's opinions on the safest hotels, said Cary Broussard, a spokeswoman for the program.

And well they might. Every year, hundreds of thousands of newly minted female executives take to the road and are apt to make the same mistakes as their predecessors did. But even veterans are vulnerable in hotels that fail to follow basic security procedures, as incidents described in recent court cases show.

A 30-year-old sales representative named Laura was sexually assaulted in February 2001 in her room at the Los Gatos Motor Inn in Los Gatos, Calif., where she had gone for a training conference for her videoconferencing company. Shortly after midnight, awakened by a knock on the door, she opened it, assuming one of her colleagues who had gone out for the evening had returned. Her attacker, who held a knife to her throat, was never found.

"If you didn't know me before, it's difficult to explain what the attack meant," said Laura, who insisted that her last name not be used. "I'm a seasoned business traveler. I had traveled on business for five years before that trip. I always thought of myself as not afraid of anything." She still travels on business, now

for an advertising-technology sales company, but she is "incredibly aware of her surroundings at all times," she said.

The motor inn settled out of court in September for a sum that Laura's lawyer, Charles Kelly of the San Francisco firm Hersh & Hersh, declined to disclose. Besides the lack of basic security devices, he said, the motel, in an upscale suburb of San Jose, had no security staff after hours. He said it installed peepholes and door latches after the attack.

Michael Masuda of the law firm of Nolan, Hamerly, Etienne Hoss in Salinas, Calif., who represented the Los Gatos Motor Inn, said, "No motel, hotel, inn or B&B can absolutely and unconditionally protect guests against random and unprecedented criminal acts."

Part of the problem, says Tia Gordon, a spokeswoman for the American Hotel and Lodging Association, is that aside from fire codes, no national standards and few state ones exist covering safety at the country's 47,000 hotels and their 4.4 million rooms.

One couple is leading a fight to change that. Sol and Linda Toder of Mount Lebanon, Pa., parents of a 33-year-old woman who was murdered by a hotel handyman in 1996 while traveling on business, are working to gain nationwide support for Nan's Law, which would require at least an employee background check of hotel workers with access to keys. So far, Mr. Toder said, legislation has been introduced into the Pennsylvania and Ohio Legislatures and has received an endorsement from AAA and the Parents of Murdered Children.

Cathy Enz, a professor at the Cornell University School of Hospital Administration, says that most chain hotels have a set of standards that include safety measures, and failure to adhere to them can be grounds for losing the franchise.

In a 2002 study of hotel safety by the Cornell University Center for Hospitality Research, the level of crime in an area was found to be directly proportional to the level of safety a hotel provides.

Airport hotels, which are often in high-crime areas, have extremely strict security, she said, and even older luxury hotels are normally quite safe. In another study, the center found that chain hotels had stronger security than smaller, independent hotels.

But in March 2001, one chain hotel missed the mark for a 23-year-old flight attendant named Jennifer, according to her lawyer, Geraldine Weiss, at the Michael J. Piuze firm in Los Angeles. Jennifer, who insisted that her last name not be used, had been working for the airline for only a month and had just finished her first long flight when she checked into the Westin Bonaventure in Los Angeles. She greeted another flight attendant on the same floor, who said Jennifer disappeared around a corner. Next she saw a man chase after her and then heard a scream and a thud. The man had grabbed Jennifer from behind and pushed her into her room.

The first flight attendant raced to call the hotel operator, and according to Jennifer's lawyer, screamed for security. Fearing that the man had a gun, she was afraid to step in herself. A while later, when no one came, Ms. Weiss said that the flight attendant called again and that still no one responded. The case went to trial in 2002, and early this year, a jury awarded the flight attendant \$2.8 million.

Jennifer declined to be interviewed, and like Laura, was still in counseling. "The hotel, which is in a downtown area that has a transient problem, had three floors set aside for flight attendants," Ms. Weiss said. "You'd think they would have provided extra security for those floors." Calls to the Westin Bonaventure were not returned.

Industry experts offer pretty much the same safety tips they always have, with Rule No. 1 not to become overconfident just because you have a lot of traveling experience. "I've known executive women who forget to pack their 'travel smarts,' " said Marybeth Bond, the author of "Gutsy Women: More Travel Wisdom for the Road" (Travelers' Tales Inc., 2001). Rather than hail a taxi themselves as they are no doubt accustomed to doing, she said, they ought to delegate that task to the hotel concierge or the headwaiter at the restaurant.

SafePlace, a Wilmington, Del., company that offers accreditation to hotels and other facilities that qualify, said they should provide common-area lighting, electronic room locks and perimeter-security measures; run background checks on job applicants; hold security courses for employees; and put emergency procedures in writing.

Travel is apparently getting safer. Thomas G. Davis, president of Hospitality Risk Controls in Dublin, Ohio, a security consultant who testifies in hotel-security civil cases, said he had not received a call about a lodging rape or murder case in the last six months. In the mid-1990's, he said, he averaged a call a month. Whether a peephole in the door is necessary "depends on the environment, such as whether the window provides a full enough view of a person at the door," he said.

Mr. Kelly argues that such features should be provided as a matter of course. "The cost to install peepholes and safety latches is about \$16 a room," he said.

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