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PRACTICAL TRAVELER

Hotels Prepare for Emergencies

By TERRY TRUCCO

Just before noon on the day Hurricane Fabian blew into Bermuda in September, 300 guests and local people at the Fairmont Hamilton Princess hotel in the island's capital, Hamilton, were shepherded into a large windowless meeting room deemed by the management the safest place in the building. For the next 12 hours, as 125-mile-an-hour winds raged outside, they watched movies, played board games and visited buffet tables replenished regularly by the kitchen staff. Pillows and blankets were available so children could nap. Smoking was prohibited, but late in the evening about 30 people were led to the basement for a cigarette.

"People were pretty antsy by the end, but I think everybody had a good time, given the conditions," said Paul Tormey, manager of the hotel. "The next day when people saw the destruction that had occurred, they were amazed. One woman thanked me for saving her life."

The marathon in the meeting room was the culmination of extensive preparations begun several days before the storm, when umbrellas, furniture and potted plants were taken inside, additional bottled water was stocked, and the pools were drained to accommodate heavy rains. But the real preparation began years earlier, in the hurricane-readiness plans written and updated by the Bermuda government, the Bermuda Hotel Association, and Fairmont, which manages the hotel. "We opened the books, read the plans and followed them," Mr. Tormey said.

Emergency planning isn't something that hotels advertise. But being prepared for calamities is a basic requirement for every hotel. Recent events like the hurricanes in Bermuda and North Carolina, the East Coast blackout and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have raised travelers' and hoteliers' awareness of contingency plans. "What you do is try to anticipate every detail of the emergencies you might face," said Alon Ben-Gurion, manager of the 1,425-room Waldorf-Astoria in New York. Such scenarios include both natural disasters and man-made problems. Southern California needs to prepare for earthquakes and brush fires, the East Coast and the Caribbean for hurricanes. Less life-threatening matters, such as a transit strike that could prevent hotel employees from getting to their jobs, can also require grand-scale preparations. "When there was a

potential M.T.A. strike a while back, we had plans to stock additional food and beverage supplies to get us through the first 72 hours and set up a system to house 30 percent of the staff at the hotel,” said David Bird, manager of the 1,000-room Roosevelt Hotel in New York.

From Ho-Hum to Urgent

Since Sept. 11, 2001, hotels, particularly in big cities, have lavished attention on emergency programs, staging drills, stocking up on flashlights, and providing additional staff training. “Contingency planning went from being sort of a ho-hum thing you’d deal with once a year to a high priority the regional vice president wants to review when he comes in,” said Richard Brush, dean of the hospitality college at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, R.I.

The attacks also prompted some hoteliers to upgrade security procedures, which can include replacing contract security workers with an in-house team. Yet background checks on staff members are still not widespread throughout the industry and are usually limited to security staff, according to John C. Fannin III, president of SafePlace, a Wilmington, Del., company that offers accreditation to hotels and other facilities that qualify. Concerns about the safety of women traveling alone has signaled a need for wider staff checks. Legislation has been introduced in Pennsylvania and Ohio to require at least one employee background check of workers with access to keys, prompted by the murder of a 33-year-old woman traveling on business by a hotel handyman in 1996.

At most hotels each staff member is assigned a task in case of emergency, whether it be manning a command post or handing out flashlights. At the Waldorf every employee carries a pocket-size map displaying hotel stairwells on the back of his or her identification tag. The procedures used throughout the industry today, Mr. Brush said, date from the proliferation of chain hotels in the latter part of the 20th century.

Even a new independent hotel rarely begins from scratch. “Most of us in boutique hotels started in larger chains and are familiar with standardized planning procedures,” said Tony Fant, executive vice president of the Soho Grand and Tribeca Grand hotels in New York and an alumnus of Renaissance hotels. In drawing up plans for his two properties, Mr. Fant consulted colleagues at large chains, dealt with organizations like the Service Managers Association of New York and, after Sept. 11, looked to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Federal Emergency Management Agency for information about biological, radiological and chemical attacks, a move that led his hotels to stock a hazmat suit for every guest.

Blackout as a Dry Run

Hoteliers in New York say the attention given emergency planning after the terrorist attacks proved beneficial during the power blackout that struck in August.

“Since 9/11 there’s been a heightened sense of awareness that helped us act fast when the power went out,” said Dan Flannery, area general manager for the Ritz-Carlton hotels in New York. Yet the blackout also showed the dire situation that can result when hotels are poorly prepared for an emergency, as scores of visitors discovered when they were stuck in pitch-black lobbies or couldn’t get up to their rooms. “The blackout was a wakeup call for New York hotels,” said Joseph E. Spinnato, president of the Hotel Association of New York City. “Hotels beefed up security after 9/11. But the particulars of dealing with a blackout, like installing backup generators, were not addressed by everyone.”

A hotel’s best defense against a power failure is a generator that goes on when the power goes off. “There’s a moment when the building goes totally black, then the generators kick in,” said Guenter Richter, managing director of the 315-room St. Regis in New York, which was completely occupied when the blackout occurred. Guest rooms are left dark, because the generators supply only limited power.

Not every hotel has a backup generator, and hotels with low-capacity generators were challenged by the length of the August blackout, which ate up gallons of diesel fuel. And unless equipment is checked regularly, generators won’t work, as several hotels discovered. Even when a generator works, problems can occur. A spark from the generator at the St. Regis ignited a small fire in the basement; guests had to evacuate the hotel briefly. And at the New York Marriott Marquis, the generator malfunctioned after three hours and the building had to be evacuated. Another problem hotels face in a power failure is keeping computerized elements like electronic keys working. “Computers will work on a backup generator, but you don’t want to use them because of possible power spikes,” Mr. Fant said. The hotels that fared best were equipped to operate the guest registry manually and were outfitted with battery-operated keycards. No statistics exist on the number of hotels with such backup systems. “But there’s no question that since the blackout hotels that want to stay competitive are addressing these issues,” Mr. Spinnato said. Stockpiling emergency equipment for guests, like flashlights, light sticks, portable fans, bottled water, blankets and snacks is vital to contingency planning. “If you don’t provide a safe form of lighting, guests will light a candle or a match,” said Mr. Ben-Gurion, who had between 20,000 and 30,000 flashlights and light sticks at the Waldorf during the blackout.

For many hotels, a big part of weathering the blackout was providing information, entertainment and food for guests as well as local people who flocked to buildings with lighted lobbies. “People like to be with other people in an emergency, so they all concentrated in the lobby,” said Mr. Ben-Gurion.

Guests at the Waldorf entertained each other with impromptu cabaret acts at Cole Porter’s piano on the mezzanine, while people clustered around battery-operated radios to hear news of the blackout in the lobby of the Tribeca Grand. Bar sales in the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton Battery Park were among the highest ever. “People kept sending each other

expensive bottles of champagne,” said Mr. Flannery. And at the St. Regis a pianist entertained well into the night. “It’s a very tedious and strenuous undertaking to create an atmosphere of calm and control, but guests need to feel that,” said Mr. Richter. “I was in my suit and tie the entire time.”

Will hotels rewrite their contingency planning handbooks with the lessons of the blackout in mind? Hoteliers say they will plan for longer power failures, increase their stockpiles of flashlights and, in several cases, add to their backup lighting. “The gas worked throughout the Tribeca Grand, but the chefs in the kitchen were cooking by flashlights,” said Mr. Fant.

Guests do not appear to have added concerns since the blackout, according to hotel managers interviewed, and hotels report no additional requests for rooms on low floors or information about backup generators. But some managers say events of recent years have changed the way they travel. “I always bring a flashlight and a bottle of water,” said Mr. Richter. Guests can practice their own contingency planning. Hotel managers recommend studying the evacuation instructions posted on the door of the room, learning the best route out of the building, and remembering to stay out of elevators.

Cities and countries may have their own approaches to dealing with emergencies. In the event of an earthquake, guests at the Park Hyatt Tokyo, which occupies the top 13 floors of a 52-story building, might be advised to stay in the building if it is structurally secure. “The understanding in Japan is it may not necessarily be safer to go out into the street in direct danger of fallen power lines and falling debris,” said Susan Chikuba, a hotel spokeswoman. During Hurricane Fabian one man, tired of being cooped up, demanded to leave the Princess meeting room. Mr. Tormey led him to a spot where he could see outside. “Things were still flying around,” he said. “After that he went back in and followed instructions.”