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Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line

A Hotelier Discusses Odd 'Green' Soaps And the Bad Energy Habits of Guests

by Kate Galbraith • June 2, 2009

Hotels these days abound with “green” features. Some are doing without newspapers to save the environment, others are offering eco-shampoos, and most now change the linen during a guest’s stay only on request.

One of the strangest green amenities I have come across was a bar of soap that I found at the boutique Carlyle Suites Hotel in Washington’s Dupont Circle area, where I stayed in March.

The soap, labeled “Green Natura,” is hollowed out like a sleek doughnut.

With most hotel soaps, “even if they’re green, half of them still get wasted because people only use them once,” explained Richard Spigler, the president of Great Addresses, the company that manages the Carlyle and also the Savoy Suites in D.C., in a recent interview.

With the Natura product, he said, “you still have a feeling like a nice big bar of soap,” but without wasting as much.

Mr. Spigler also spoke candidly about the challenges facing the hotel business in its effort to go green. Electricity is his largest expense, and the company recently purchased enough wind power to meet all of its electricity needs through a green exchange run by World Energy, at a roughly 5 percent premium over conventional electricity.

“Needless to say, it frankly is not an easy decision in these difficult times to pay more for electricity than we have to. And that’s what we did,” Mr. Spigler said. He had originally intended to buy only 10 percent wind power, but after being surprised by the relatively low prices, he ended up buying 100 percent wind.

Some of his greening initiatives — which often cost 10 to 15 percent more than conventional alternatives — have gone slightly awry. The company decided to offer a more environmentally friendly type of coffee in the room, but “it wasn’t successful with our guests. It tasted awful,” Mr. Spigler said.



The Carlyle Suites Hotel in Washington takes a doughnut approach to conserving soap. Kate Galbraith/The New York Times

Now, the company uses a brand called Newman’s Own Organics, and he said it tastes delicious.

A simple new initiative Mr. Spigler is trying, following the suggestion of one of the company’s housekeeping employees, is to close the drapes when a room is unoccupied. That should save energy, he said, and while guests may miss out on seeing the view when they enter the room for the first time, “We think the market is ready for that.”

Mr. Spigler says that one of his biggest challenges is to persuade guests not to waste energy. It is well known, he said, that “guests do in hotels what they would never do at home.” That applies not only to trashing the room, but also to leaving on lights, televisions and air-conditioners.

Some European hotels have addressed this problem by wiring the rooms so that electric appliances and lights automatically switch off when the guest leaves the room. But Mr. Spigler said that such improvements typically require a major capital renovation, and most hotels — including his — are unlikely to schedule a special overhaul just for electrical work.

“The great majority of rooms in this country won’t be doing that in the next 10 years,” he predicted.