

A funny thing happened on the way to a conference – and other stories

BY VALERIE J LUND

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit www.exovent.org (or scan the QR code below) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).

Hotels.com

It is difficult to say how many different hotel rooms I have stayed in during my life – most unmemorable, some extraordinary, others interesting but not always in a good way. I always say that one can judge a hotel by the soap, and I am fascinated by the sheer range of bathroom fittings and the infinite permutations of switching on a shower. Controls may be incorporated into the marble fascia, requiring a mastery of Braille to sort out what they are for, or you may inadvertently provoke a light show as combinations of illuminations spring into action and curtains open and close at the touch of a button. Even getting into a bathroom can be difficult, especially if it takes you some time to realise it is a sliding door.

I have been in hotel lifts in Newcastle which inexplicably spoke French, rooms with pulleys and hoists (purportedly for the disabled) and shared my room with various wildlife including a moderately large monitor lizard in Sarawak which the hotel staff tried to discourage with fly spray, causing annoyance to both the lizard and me.

In some Japanese hotels in times gone by, the room phone allowed you to select background noise

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Prof Dame Lund at her recent investiture at Windsor Castle.

for your call home to your loved ones, which included an airport, a train station and a bar – I can’t imagine why!

Talking of hotel phones, I was in a South Korean hotel where several businessmen were indulging in a major drinking session next door that went on until 3am. As I was leaving at 5am to catch a plane, I also organised an automatic wake-up call for my neighbours on a 10-minute repeat from 4.30am onwards. Am I filled with remorse? What do you think?

Once, at breakfast in a Japanese hotel, I was shocked to see that I was surrounded by women who had fingernails so long that they had to be fed

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by the person accompanying them. Others had the most extraordinarily large breasts that required cantilevered support. Then a tiny homunculus ran past my table, a little person no more than two feet high. As a veritable giant then strode into the room, it became clear that they had all come for a Japanese TV show akin to the *Guinness Book of Records*.

One of my most 'interesting' hotel experiences was in Indonesia, many years ago at the Hotel Jakarta which is now, for reasons that will become clear, defunct. I arrived after a long journey in the middle of the night and was shown to my room on the first floor. The clue to the hotel status was that the outside corridors were in what appeared to be 'army barrack' style, open to the elements. The room was predictably small and grubby with a stained and cigarette-burnt carpet. As the guest of the meeting organisers, I felt slightly awkward, though not enough, to refuse this offering. So the porter and I proceeded on to the third floor where a similar room awaited me and which I also declined. Finally, we reached the eighth and last floor and thank goodness, a more modern and definitely cleaner room was on offer. Hurrah!

So, straight to bed but I was now aware of a dripping bathroom tap, the head of which simply span round when I tried to turn it off. In most Far Eastern hotels, on pushing the service button, help arrives within seconds. In the Hotel Jakarta, pushing the service button caused it to fall into the wall as it was not actually attached to anything. So, at 3am I respectfully requested a plumber who duly turned up clutching a Philips screwdriver. Fortunately, my trusty Swiss Army knife saved the day, the tap was tightened and off he went. Now, as I desperately tried to sleep, the room lights started to flash on and off spontaneously. "Could you send an electrician?" I asked the front desk and up came my friend with his Philips screwdriver at the ready. My only consolation was that colleagues who had accepted the less salubrious rooms experienced close encounters with large cockroaches during the night or, in one case, found that the room was in darkness despite it being morning, because on throwing back the curtains they discovered that the windows of this bedroom had been bricked up!

One 'golden' rule when staying in hotels is always to check where the fire escape is located. I have had to leave hotels on three occasions, all in the USA, when fire alarms sprang into life in the middle of the night. On each occasion, I was reasonably confident that it was a false alarm, but it can be quite an enervating experience, particularly if the emergency lighting also goes on the blink, feeling one's way along the walls in pitch black and unfamiliar environments. It is always interesting to see how staff deal with these situations, often enabling one to claim a reduction in the hotel charges. Of course, it can also be weirdly entertaining to see one's friends and colleagues in a state of undress and in unexpected combinations.

Even water can be an issue. Australian friends booked me into a charming boutique hotel replete with Victorian wrought iron, finials and furbelows, convenient to their hospital in Sydney where a FESS course I was helping with would be run. During the last night of my stay, a rainstorm of tropical proportions hammered down. By the next morning, I was rather alarmed to see that there was a distinct sag in the ceiling from which water was ominously dripping. I removed my suitcases from the room as the staff arrived with a wastepaper bin to collect the drops. "You're going to need a bigger bucket" I said as the ceiling spectacularly collapsed under the weight of the water. Needless to say, the hotel slipped off the course guest accommodation list thereafter.

A large European meeting was taking place in Sorrento where I had booked a beautiful room in an elegant 19th-century hotel overlooking the bay and the isle of Capri. Unfortunately, the fixtures and fittings had not been upgraded since the 19th century and one of the large rococo mirrors fell from the wall, hitting David on the back of the head and knocking him out cold. Thank goodness I managed to revive him by pouring a waste bin of cold water over his head and we kept a reasonable 'social' distance from all wall furniture thereafter.

I often regret not keeping a record of the multitude of hotel rooms I have stayed in over the years. A collage of all 'the view from my hotel window' photos might be strangely entertaining, though remembering where they all were could prove a worrying test of the little grey cells.

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