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Gadgets, gizmos and a good night's sleep

You, too, can be a guestroom guinea pig

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Marriot's experimental guestroom features technology you won't see in your typical hotel stay.

I should've known I was in trouble the moment I slipped my keycard into the hotel room door. There was no green light, no muffled clicked, no nothing — except for the familiar ding! of delayed comprehension.

Note to (often clueless, easily distracted) self: Yo, Einstein, the end with the little arrow goes in first.

Fortunately, it only took me two more tries to get it right. (Oddly enough, I seem to have a similar problem with flash drives and USB ports, but that's another story.) Trouble is, when you're checking into something called the Experimental Guestroom and you're flummoxed by something as simple as a keycard door lock, you could be forgiven for wondering if you're up to the experience.

Hotel technology, it seems, marches on. I just hope I can keep up.

One hotel, multiple missions

From the outside, the Courtyard Newark-University of Delaware resembles your basic business-friendly, midscale hotel. Opened in 2004, it offers convenient accommodations for travelers visiting the campus and the adjacent Clayton Hall conference center.

Inside, though, it's another story. For one thing, the hotel is also a training facility for the university's Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management program. Students take classes, work alongside staffers and get practical experience interacting with guests.

Then there's Room 114, aka the Experimental Guestroom or X-Room, which serves as a test lab for new technology. Overnight guests are encouraged to experiment with the room's 16 or so high-tech products and systems; their feedback is then used to help Marriott determine what technologies warrant a larger rollout in the years to come.

Such tests rooms are not uncommon, although few hotels make them as available to guests as the Courtyard Newark-UD. Hilton, for example, tests out new room concepts in a Hilton Garden Inn near LAX — elite Hilton Honors members get first dibs — while Starwood invites franchisees and other select groups to explore prototypical rooms in a warehouse in Hawthorne, N.Y.

But in Newark, anyone can stay in the X-Room. Some guests request it when making reservations while others are offered it upon arrival when it's unoccupied. "Senator Olympia Snowe recently stayed in it," says Managing Director William Sullivan. "She loved it and said she wanted to come back when she had more time to learn more about the technology."

Which, in a way, speaks to the crux of the concept. "We want to have technology that's functional without overwhelming people," says Sullivan. "We want to introduce new stuff, but we don't want guests to have to call the front desk to find out how to turn the TV on."

What's next for hotel tech?

At first glance, the X-Room looks like a fairly typical Courtyard guestroom (albeit one with an in-room spa tub). There's a king bed, mini-fridge and coffeemaker — along with a 42-inch flat-screen TV, Windows Media Center–equipped computer and, not one, not two, but eight remotes. Fortunately, four are controllers for the Wii, leaving just four for the TV, computer, sound system and a digital picture frame.

The TV remote is particularly handy as it also operates an onscreen menu that lets you control room lights, adjust environmental settings and access hotel services. Even a Luddite like me — I'm not so much technophobic, really, just generally technofeeble — managed to program the system so that, come morning, the lights and TV would come on over the course of a 15-minute fade in.

Fact is, most X-Room amenities are more functional than futuristic. The digital door viewer offers a better view of the corridor than a peephole while a six-tipped Chargepod provides power for people who travel with multiple electronics. The oddest product is probably Clocky, an alarm clock that looks like a cross between a Tonka toy and R2D2. (Hit the snooze button and it will roll off the nightstand and around the room, beeping and chirping, until you get out of bed and hunt it down — or hit it with a shoe.)

It's all about determining what works (water-saving showerheads, Gore-Tex mattress covers), what doesn't (an early-generation Roomba) and what won't freak people out. Case in point: one guest was worried that all the technology was being used to watch him and monitor his activity.

As for the future, says Sullivan, the inspiration for new guestroom amenities will come, somewhat ironically, not from the industry, but from guests themselves: “The question is going to be, ‘What are people putting in their homes?’ That’s the stuff that’s going to be required by the traveling public.”

For now, he sees a lot of promise for the digital door viewer, along with wireless charging systems (via conductive pads) and proximity-based keycards that can be used to open doors, sign restaurant checks and access services around the hotel.

Who knows, with that last one, I may even be able to get into my room on the first try.

Rob Lovitt is a frequent contributor to msnbc.com. If you'd like to respond to one of his columns or suggest a story idea, [drop him an e-mail](#).

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