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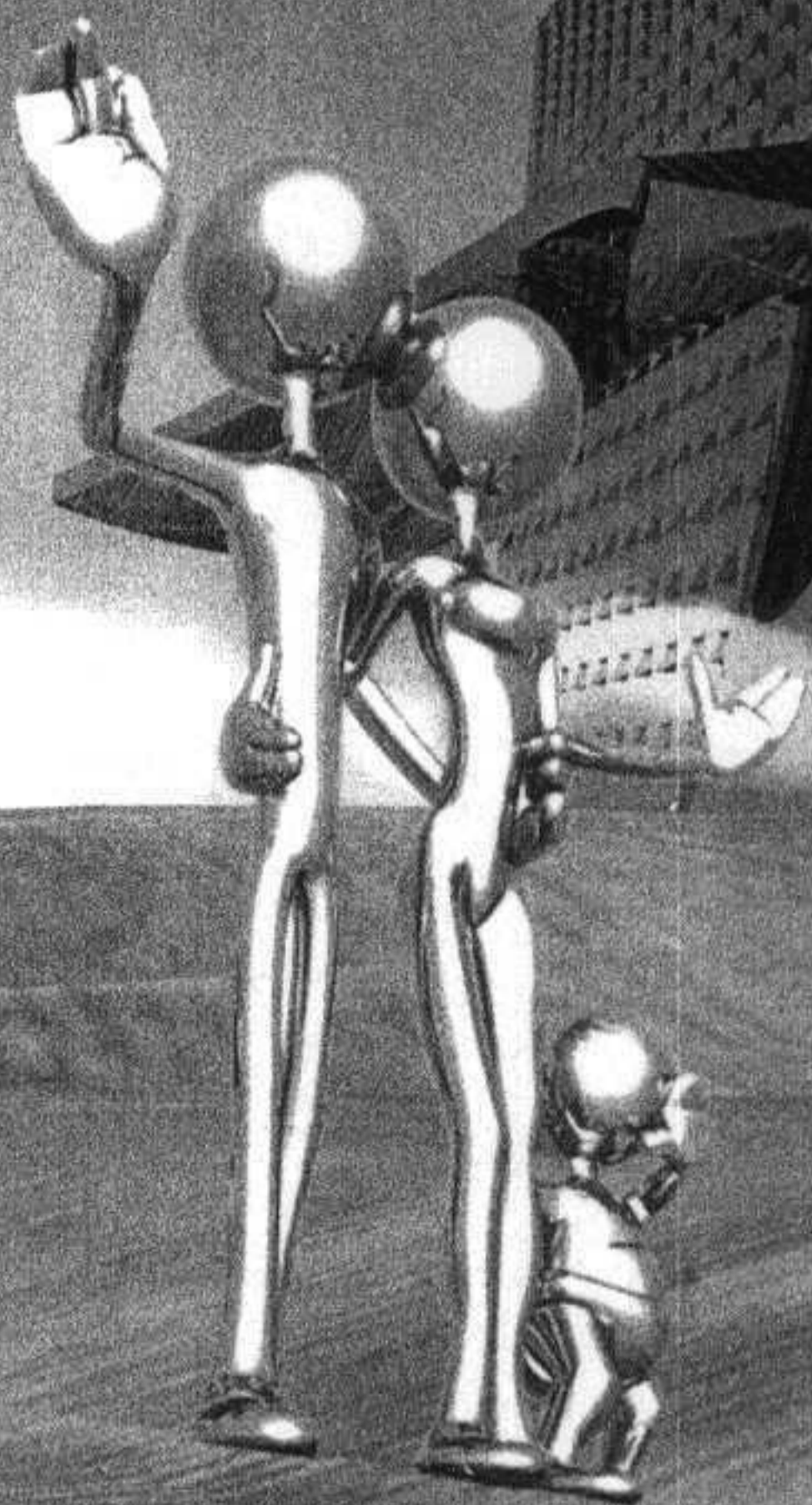
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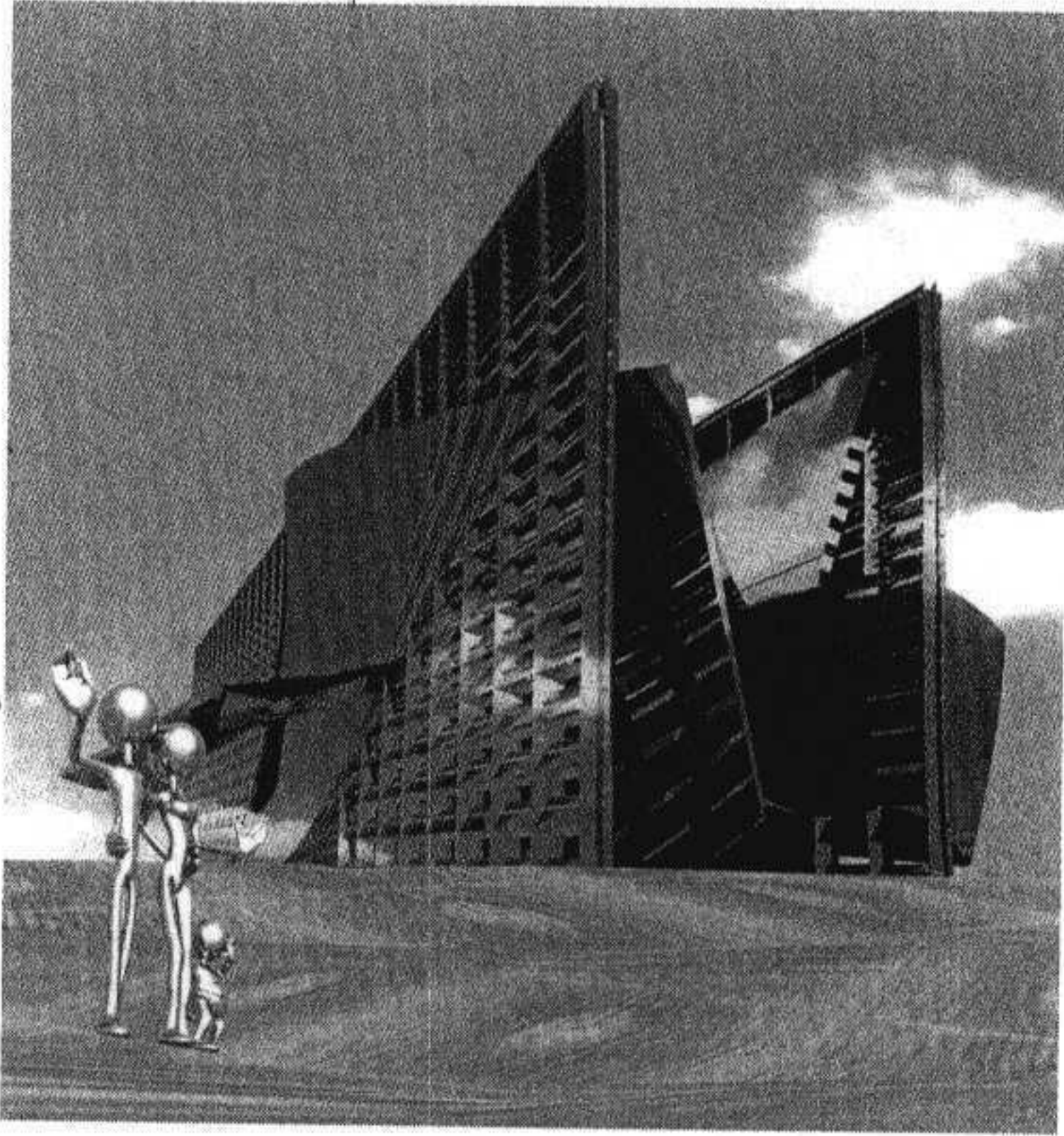
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SELLING THE NEW WAVE IN HOTELS



How you can turn emerging trends in accommodations into sales opportunities

BY KERRY MEDINA



FINDING PROFIT IN THE NEW

How you can turn emerging hotel trends into sales opportunities

The lodging industry has certainly rebounded from the havoc that was wreaked on it by the events of Sept. 11. A significant indicator of its robust health is the frenzy of its emerging trends. Existing hotel companies are adding luxury and boutique brands to their portfolios, while new upscale hotel companies are springing up around the world.

But to a certain degree, selling such properties is a no-brainer. If you've sold upscale or boutique accommodations before, you're halfway to booking the latest in luxury lodgings. The real trick is knowing how to turn a profit on the industry's somewhat less apparent trends; such gimmicky promotions as "pet-friendly hotels" and "mancations" may seem to be catchy ways to garner press coverage for a property, but at-home agents can benefit from these increasingly commonplace hotel practices.

Pets have been taking to the road with their owners since time immemorial, but it's only in recent years that the lodging industry has started welcoming four-legged guests. Following Loews Hotels' (www.loewshotels.com) launch of the "Loews Loves Pets" program in 2000, an increasing number of hotels are offering such pet-friendly amenities as a dog-themed book for guests and dog biscuits for their pets, in addition to "petiquette" classes such as those available at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort (www.ritzcarlton.com) in Naples, Fla.

However, telling a client who is traveling with a pet that certain hotels offer complimentary dog treats and personal-

ized water bowls may not cut it. Many pet owners consider their animal to be a member of the family, and so they're likely to appreciate the travel professional who goes the extra mile for them. Find out if a hotel has specific services or facilities available to guests traveling with pets. For instance, ask: Are hotel staff members ever available to walk a guest's dog? Could the concierge recommend nearby parks with dog runs? To what extent will the pet experience the property as its owner will? For example, Steinhatchee Landing Resort (www.steinhatcheelanding.com), in Steinhatchee, Fla., does not offer any specific pet amenities, but the property can provide a "pet vacation."

"Our biggest lure is the nature that surrounds the property," says Patty Zubrick, the resort's office manager. "Dogs love our property, which is on 35 wooded acres filled with oak trees and plenty of squirrels."

Steinhatchee Landing comprises 29 privately owned one-, two- and three-bedroom cottages, nine of which are available to guests with pets. The "Pet Vacations" section of the resort's website gently reminds guests bringing their dogs of such rules as keeping pets off the furniture. However, as Zubrick points out, "All of the cottages have screened or covered porches, so a guest's dog can sit outside and enjoy the fresh air." The resort staff also encourages guests with pets to take their animals along for rides in a pontoon boat or for canoeing or kayaking excursions.

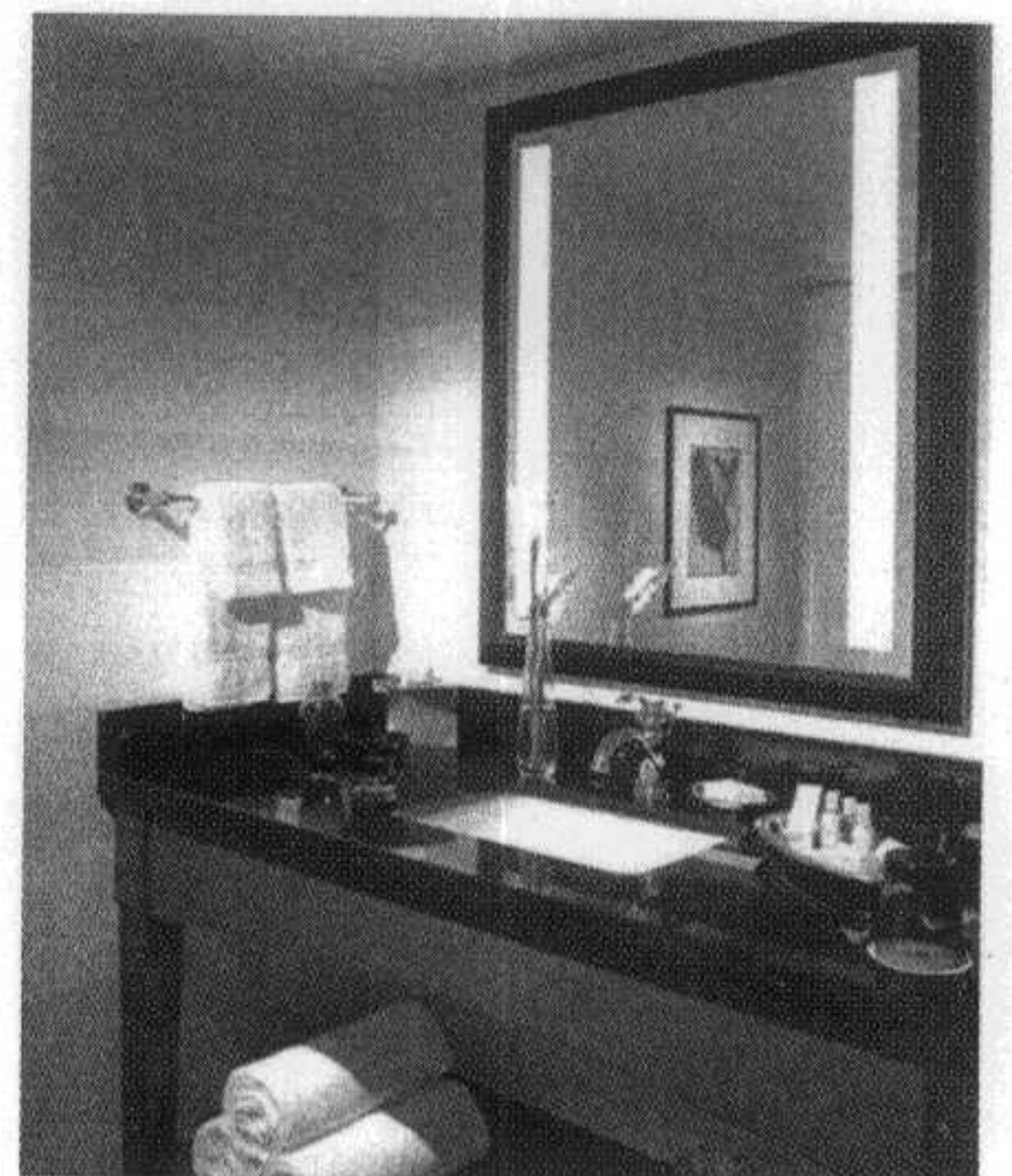
But pets aren't the only guests who can enjoy some adventure while on vacation. A rapidly growing number of hotels are inviting men to book a stay with their male friends or family members and enjoy the male equivalent of a girlfriends' getaway package. Following the success of these women-only offerings, the lodging industry has fast leveled the playing field

of gender-specific packages by creating guy getaways.

"Girlfriends want to enjoy the spa, but guys want adventure or to go to a sporting event," says Marcel Pitton, the general manager of Denver's Brown Palace (www.brownpalace.com). Such properties as the Brown Palace are catering to boys who just want to have fun with the "Boys of the Brown" vacation, which includes accommodations, tours of Coors Field and the Great Divide Brewing Company, a six-pack of beer with pint glasses, a \$50 credit for the hotel's cigar bar, two massages and valet parking.

Theoretically, these packages are great ideas, but in practice they can be tricky to sell. After all, how many guys are going to discuss what they wouldn't give for a weekend "away from it all" on their regular poker night? In fact, "a large percentage of these bookings are made by men's wives or men who are very busy professionals," says Pitton.

Travel agents should also consider the actual accommodations, as some men may not want to share a room with other men.



Spa-like bathrooms, such as those found at D.C.'s M Street Renaissance Hotel, appeal to a younger clientele.

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"If you're going to sell a group of guys on a getaway package, you're either going to sell them individual accommodations in the most standard room available or one room in the most spacious suite in the property, and it should have at least one bedroom and maybe a pull-out couch, if not two bedrooms," Pitton says.

Also keep in mind that pre-arranged activities don't appeal to all men, which is to say, they might like to know what's lined up for them when they arrive, but they don't want to hit the ground running as soon as they get there. So make sure the hotel offers some elasticity in the scheduling of included activities. "[Guests can do the] brewery tour included in our package—at their leisure. We give them the tickets and information on hours of operation," Pitton says. "There's usually some leeway with included activities. I think it's important that guests have some flexibility."

But the ability to decide where to spend their time and when to spend it is not the only freedom that hotel guests want. Some are also looking for "quality adult time," and as a result, several hotels and resorts are featuring new "kid-free" zones.

For instance, Nassau's newly opened The Cove at Atlantis (www.thecove-atlantis.com) has made its concierge club floor "kids free" and has also created an adults-only pool, Cain at the Cove, as well as an adults-only nightclub, Aura.

Guests traveling without children and who are not interested in interacting with kids during their vacation are the most obvious candidates for making use of such amenities. But guests traveling with children are also likely to consider a reprieve from action-packed kid activities—such as the new Aquaventure water experience or Dolphin Cay, the new interactive dolphin experience—with a visit to the adult pool or an evening at Aura.

"These amenities ensure that our guests traveling with children never feel as though they're infringing upon others," says Jamie Bruce, the senior vice president of sales. "We did a few things differently to distinguish this product from the rest

of the destination. It allows our guests to have many different experiences."

Another new experience available to guests at Atlantis (www.atlantis.com) is Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill. This is the celebrity chef's first restaurant venture outside the U.S., but he's certainly not the first celebrity chef to partner with a hotel or resort. This phenomenon is raging throughout the hotel segment; Michelin-starred Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten recently signed on with Starwood to bring his New York-based Spice Market concept and other yet-to-



Guests at Atlantis can enjoy Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill.

be-developed concepts to Starwood's various brands worldwide.

This past year, Joël Robuchon, another Michelin-starred chef, has opened restaurants at both Las Vegas' MGM Grand and New York's Four Seasons hotels. So bringing Bobby Flay onboard certainly keeps Atlantis competitive in the marketplace.

According to Bruce, restaurants with ties to celebrity chefs are strong influences when high-end clients are deciding where to stay. "Such restaurants give a certain credibility to the dining experience, whether it's a celebrity chef restaurant or even a branded restaurant," says Bruce. "It allows guests and potential guests to know what to expect."

Renaissance Hotels & Resorts (www.marriott.com) has also found a means of

letting guests know what to expect, but in its guest rooms and guest baths rather than through the dining experience. Renaissance Hotels is giving its 68 hotels and resorts a new look and feel that includes more technologically advanced guest rooms and spa-like bathrooms.

The high-tech guest rooms are, in fact, part of a Marriott-wide initiative, with the primary mission of adding a technology panel to all rooms so that guests can plug in their iPods, camcorders and/or digital cameras and access the audiovisual through the room's 32-inch, high-definition, LCD television. This enhancement could easily be attributed to the high number of tech-savvy travelers who can't leave home without their gadgets of choice.

The bathroom upgrades require more of an explanation in order to be used as selling points with clients. The hotel industry's tendency toward glass-enclosed showers or curved shower rods for added space has reached the bathrooms of Renaissance.

The new M Street Renaissance Hotel in Washington also features Speakman showerheads, which allow guests to adjust the water pressure to their liking; such luxe toiletries as lavender facial soap and yuzu-bergmot moisturizer; and terry-cloth bath towels that are rolled and placed in a basket under the sink, not simply folded and sitting on a rack.

"Our customers don't want the same old bathroom, and this look creates a more tranquil, spa-like atmosphere," says Thom Puccio, the property's director of sales and marketing, who adds that the brand's audience tends to skew younger, between the ages of 25 and 45.

Because these clients tend to be very fitness conscious, mentioning a spa-like bathroom and some of its innovative contents could be a deciding factor among clients who are spa-goers, busy executives who appreciate a few small luxuries in the little time they spend in their rooms or those simply looking for a property that will provide them an experience as well as a place to stay, as Puccio says is the case with Renaissance's clientele. @

ROOMS ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Selling hotel stays in off-the-beaten-path destinations is a matter of putting clients at ease with the exotic

BY KERRY MEDINA

There's a certain amount of simplicity that goes with booking hotels in the world's more commonly visited locales. Selling clients accommodations that are in their own geographic backyard—North America and Europe, for instance—usually requires a more intimate knowledge of the property rather than the destination. On the other hand, booking hotels in typically unconventional destinations can present more of a challenge. But armed with the right information and a few good contacts, such sales can be opportunities instead of obstacles.

Initially, consider drafting a document that details some general guidelines for traveling to out-of-the-ordinary places, and give it to your clients before they commit themselves. This should give you a means of gauging how serious they are about such a far-flung trip, and give them an idea of what to expect when they arrive. It will also, ideally, prevent a bad travel experience for the client.

Stephanie Sonnabend, the president and CEO of Boston-based Sonesta Hotels & Resorts, offers the following advice for agents to pass along to clients:

- Travelers should try to obtain some local currency, including small bills, either before leaving or right after arriving. Not very much cash is needed, since most cities have ATMs that dispense local currency. This, in fact, is the easiest way to obtain the local currency.
- Travelers should call their credit card company before they travel so that the fraud department does not flag their card or put it on hold after an international transaction is made.
- Be aware of local customs regarding dress, as in some areas shorts and

tank tops may not be appropriate. Travelers who will be away more than a week can likely find a laundry service. They should pack a few very practical shoes such as sneakers, a comfortable pair of walking shoes, dress shoes and flip flops. They should not bring very high heels, as many places don't have nicely paved roads or sidewalks.

- Travelers planning to backtrack during their trip should plan on leaving one suitcase behind and picking it up later. Clients should ask the hotel where they are staying during an earlier segment of the trip to hold the suitcase until they return; most will do so for free, or just a gratuity.
- Clients should not assume that shopping, dining and attractions will be open when they want them to be. Knowing in advance the hours and days of operation of local stores, restaurants and sightseeing attractions can be very useful. In some cultures, stores close at midday and reopen later, and in other cultures, they close early and are not open on weekends. This can even vary from city to city or region to region within a destination.
- Private tour guides are usually well worth the price, especially for the first day of a trip. Sometimes they come with a car and driver, which makes getting around very convenient. These guides can make suggestions about local places to visit independently and restaurants where locals eat, which can often result in a very pleasant surprise. The easiest way for travelers to arrange a private guide is either through the hotel or



The four-room Casa Cid de Leon in Oaxaca can be booked through Mexico Boutique Hotels.

a local tour operator.

- Though travelers can usually find someone who speaks English, they must not assume that everyone does. They should always take the name, address and phone number of their hotel, written in the local language, to be able to give it to a local or a taxi driver. When traveling in a more remote part of a country, visitors should keep in mind that people may not speak the national language, but rather local dialects.

Booking hotels off the beaten path often requires both an understanding of the hotel as well as familiarity with the destination. The quickest and easiest way to access this information is through first-hand experience. But for agents working from home, fairs may be rare experiences, and fairs to some of the world's more exotic regions are likely to

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