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HOSPITALITY

High-end hotels are going wireless

Upscale locations are adding high-tech systems that let guests control lights, curtains, alarm clocks and more.

By Hugo Martín
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Cristina Riveroll demonstrates how guests can access their account information at the Aloft hotel by using their room's high-definition television. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times / August 11, 2009)

When Elliot Aleskow recently checked into the Montage Beverly Hills, the Maryland doctor got a room with what seemed to be typical hotel amenities: A bed, a flat-screen TV, curtains, an alarm clock, lamps and a remote control.

But there was nothing typical about the room's built-in technology.

Using the remote control and an on-screen television menu, Aleskow programmed the alarm clock to play his favorite music in the morning. He also opened the curtains and set the room temperature and lighting just the way he likes it -- all by pushing a few buttons on the remote.

"It gives me a feeling of being at home and makes me feel comfortable," he said of the wireless technology.

Expect to see more sophisticated circuitry in hotel rooms across the country.

Although high-tech gadgets may seem to be unnecessary luxuries, particularly in the midst of a steep recession, more hotels are investing in technology upgrades because occupancy rates are low and hardware manufacturers are motivated to sell.

"Across the board, the really seasoned venture capitalist says now is the best time to upgrade," said Danny Briere, chief executive of Richmond, Va., consulting firm TeleChoice Inc.

For now, guests are starting to see such gee-whiz upgrades at upscale hotels where room rates can average \$200 to \$400 a night.

The landmark Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles plans to install remote-controlled drapes and to improve cellular service during an 18-month renovation project that begins in October.

Sheraton Hotels & Resorts teamed with Microsoft Corp. last summer to install table-top, touch-screen computers in the lobby of selected hotels that enable guests to get directions to shops and restaurants, download music playlists and organize vacation photos.

But these are not just high-tech gizmos to entertain guests. Hotel executives are banking on such devices to save money and attract new guests at a time when too many rooms are sitting vacant and hotel revenues have fallen an average of 15% or more, with those at upscale hotels plummeting more than 25%.

By automating the lighting, heating and cooling systems to shut off when a room is empty, hotel owners say they can cut energy costs significantly. Touch-screen kiosks that scan credit cards and spit out room keys can reduce staffing costs.

“A lot of hotels are reasonably healthy and are using the down period to do renovations,” said Douglas Rice, executive vice president of Hotel Technology Next Generation, a trade group promoting collaboration between hotels and tech providers.

At the Montage, guests can control nearly every amenity in the room without getting out of bed. Using a remote control and a TV screen menu, guests like Aleskow can adjust lights, the thermostat, television channels, alarms, drapes and even disable the door bell for privacy. The high-end hotel, with 201 rooms, 55 suites and a 20,000-square-foot spa, is owned by Beverly Hills Luxury Hotel.

“The system in the Montage is so simple,” Aleskow said. “You don’t have to think at all.”

Control4, an automation and entertainment firm based in Salt Lake City, developed the system used in the Montage and three other U.S. hotels.

The technology takes advantage of a new standard protocol that enables the various electronic devices in a room – the mechanism in the drapes, the dimmer switches in the lights and the thermostat – to communicate.

Thanks to the standard communications protocol, hotels can install gadgets throughout a room without the need for wiring, said Jim Gist, vice president of global hospitality for Control4.

The system at the Montage has been programmed to switch off the air conditioner and lights and close the drapes once a guests checks out at the front counter, he said.

“With the energy savings and by cutting the wires, it almost pays for itself in the first year,” Gist said.

New technology is also on display at the Aloft hotel in Rancho Cucamonga. The hotel chain is a division of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc., which also owns the Sheraton brand.

At the front lobby, two touch-screen kiosks stand where guests typically find a front desk. By sliding a credit card into one of the kiosks, guests can check in and order a room key without talking to a hotel employee. The kiosks are also connected to the reservation system of more than a dozen airlines, enabling guests to print out boarding passes from the hotel lobby. A staffer is also available for technophobic guests.

The technology extends to the fitness center, where a flat-screen television is built into the treadmills to show movies and play music from hand-held media players. In the rooms, guests can plug all their hand-held devices -- including digital music players and laptop computers -- into a docking station that connects them to the 42-inch LCD television screen.

Even the pool is equipped with underwater speakers so guests can hear the hotel’s lobby music underwater.

Although many of the gadgets help the hotel save money, Aloft sales manager Jorge Azpeitia said the main goal was to set the hotel apart from others so that guests return.

Said Azpeitia: “Everything is designed to make some kind of memory.”

hugo.martin@latimes.com

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