

The George V is owned by technology fan Prince Alwaleed and this is reflected in the hotel.



Top hotels have become one of the biggest victims of shrinking budgets in recent years. They are turning to technology to buck the trend.

Technological transformations

By Christian Sylt

As companies have gradually tightened their purse strings, bank-busting stays in grand hotels have become a thing of the past for many business travellers. Ageing palace properties now face competition from both budget chains and new-build business hotels. But some grande dames are bucking the trend by turning to technology in a bid to resuscitate visitor numbers.

Two hotels taking the high-tech route are the Four Seasons George V in Paris and the Dorchester in London, both of which have undergone multi-million euro renovations in recent years.

When it opened in 1928, the George V set new standards in the hospitality industry. Early press coverage described the hotel as 'conceived in the spirit of elegant luxury and endowed with the latest technological innovations'. These included the installation in each guest room of telephones with both outside and hotel service lines; suites with two bath-

rooms, 'allowing two people to take a bath at the same time and be ready to go down to dinner together'; and extra-wide corridors on guest floors to eliminate luggage gridlock and fire alarms. The hotel's art deco design drew as much attention as its technological touches but by the mid-1990s its lustre was beginning to fade and the property was put up for sale in 1996.

In fairytale fashion, the Parisian palace was purchased by Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed for around €145 million and closed for an unprecedented two-year renovation. An investor in technology titans such as Microsoft and Apple, the Prince has a personal interest in high-tech hotels and the George V is his flagship.

Once again it is pulling in plaudits for its innovation and Didier Le Calvez, the hotel's general manager, says that its revolutionary 'Wayport' system is most convenient for business travellers as it 'allows guests to hook up to the internet from anywhere in the hotel, whilst having a drink in the bar or doing a PowerPoint presentation in a conference room'. But it's the in-room amenities that

matter most and in this respect the George V is a paradigm to its Parisian peers.

Down duvets and pillows are standard and the huge marble bathrooms are filled with the finest Bulgari toiletries. All the rooms are equipped with satellite television, fax hook-up, plus telephone with voicemail, speaker and data ports. Alwaleed is believed to have cupboards in his Riyadh palace big enough to get lost in and as he personally purveyed over the hotel's renovation, it is of little surprise that room size in the George V doesn't disappoint. The original building's total of 320 guest rooms was reduced to 245 for a redistribution of space. They now measure from 37 to 55 square metres each, making them the largest rooms in Paris.

The size of the 61 suites is vast, ranging from 70 to 155 square metres. And because

Guests without laptops can access Word, Excel or PowerPoint on the plasma screen using the remote keyboard in the Dorchester's rooms.

they are on the upper floors of the hotel, guests have spectacular city views from their balconies – with an uninterrupted panorama of the Parisian skyline from the Sacré Coeur to the Eiffel Tower. For those who can afford the €6,500 per night price tag, one of the hotel's presidential suites even offers cardiovascular equipment, a steam bath and a sauna. ▽

◁ The fitness centre, spa, swimming pool and sauna are enough to tempt anyone away from work, but make no mistake; the George V can cater for the most demanding business needs. The hotel has 1,200 square metres of some of Paris's most luxurious event space, spread across seven rooms including the ballroom, which can accommodate up to 480 guests. And whilst the 24-hour business centre offers *de rigueur* services such as secretarial assistance, translation and photocopying, extra touches like one-hour laundry pressing and complimentary overnight shoeshine put the property a cut above its competitors for business stays.

Le Calvez says business travellers often prolong their stays for leisure reasons or return for family breaks at the weekend because the hotel "has all the business facilities at hand as well as all the characteristics appealing to a leisure traveller". As part of its renovation, 17th century tapestries from Flanders were restored and now adorn the walls. Some 20,000 square metres of marble and 15,000 square metres of carpet were cleaned to bring the hotel back to its Art Deco grandeur.

With more than twice as many staff as guest rooms, service is stunning and Le Cinq, the hotel's restaurant, won its second Michelin star in March 2001. But the most captivating quality of the George V, and one that appeals to weary business travellers, is that while opulent, the hotel is far from austere.

Elaborate floral designs entice the crowds and add life to the lobby. Every year the hotel spends €1.5 million on flowers, buying between 15,000 and 17,000 stems a week from the Netherlands. Seven full-time staff work exclusively on floral design and each week create a new theme. The attention to detail is dazzling. Arrangements are individually styled for each room and flower sculptures are rejuvenated daily – sometimes even hourly.

The George V offers business travellers the killer combination of timeless elegance and subtle technology, but at a cost. Le Calvez says Paris has been bucking the downturn in the hotel trade and the George V's average rate of €670 reflects this. However, its occupancy of 82 per cent in 2002 proves that plenty of people are still prepared to pay for quality.

The same can be said for the Dorchester in London, a member of Leading Hotels of the World and another top hotel that has spent a huge amount on technological upgrades in recent years.

In 2000 it began one of the most radical in-room refurbishments in the hotel's history. Despite having a full business centre, boardroom and offices, the hotel's general manager David Wilkinson wanted to offer guests the best business facilities without them having to leave their rooms. Guests can now access the internet at high speed, watch films, listen to music on demand and put together a PowerPoint presentation, all from the comfort of their beds. The television is the key.

"Our Finlux televisions had reached the end of their normal life expectancy and needed



The Dorchester is over 70 years old but it has the most high-tech rooms in London.

urgent replacement," says Wilkinson, who saw a demonstration of a digital interactive system on trial at an exclusive clinic in London in 2000. It used a 107-centimetre plasma screen TV and although these were out of the

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hotel's price range at the time, Wilkinson wagered that within two years, the price would plummet and the technology would improve. He was right.

Today the Dorchester's new rooms are dominated by huge plasma screens concealed in custom-built wooden cabinets which, according to Wilkinson, "retain the hotel's English country house style". The hotel had never had movies on demand because Wilkinson wasn't prepared to have large banks of video recorders in the basement providing poor picture quality on a limited number of films to a limited number of guests at a time. He wanted a solution for the 21st century and London-based software company Neos TV came up with the goods.

Using an infrared keyboard, guests can command a selection of 60 films to watch whenever they wish, with a DVD-quality picture. And as it's digital, the movie can be

paused and returned to at will. Of course, a big advantage for international visitors is that they can opt to watch films in their native languages. Up to 5,000 music tracks are also available and the hotel spared no expense by installing Bose systems for the best sound.

However, the biggest benefits have come from the P4 computer that controls the TV system and is carefully hidden in the cabinet. There is a high-speed connection to the internet, both on the TV and at the desk point, provided by a 2Mb line into the hotel, while the advent of internet radio means foreign guests can listen to their local stations. By duplicating all the sockets for UK and US plugs, foreign visitors feel even more at home.

Guests can also plug their laptops into the plasma screen using a VGA socket at the desk, allowing them to give or rehearse PowerPoint presentations in their rooms. The cabinet cleverly conceals a printer, so guests can print from their laptops by plugging them into a USB socket at the desk. This also operates as a fax, photocopier and scanner; guests can even print from the TV using a switch located in the cabinet. The system saves the hotel printing a bulky directory as it is loaded onto the system. And guests without laptops don't lose out as they can access Word, Excel or PowerPoint on the plasma TV screen using the remote keyboard.

For the less IT literate guests, the hotel has pioneered an 'e-butler' to advise them. The system is also easily upgradeable. The Dorchester has designed it to last and it costs over €7,500 to install in each room. But Wilkinson isn't troubled by the cost. "We have developed revenue streams from films, music library, internet access, office applications, advertising, laptop connectivity and, in future, commissions from sales over the system," he says. Concierges should be concerned: this system's so powerful it could replace them. **EB**