

Nights to remember

DAVID CARROLL ASKS FIVE OF THE NATION'S BEST CORPORATE TRAVEL AGENTS TO REVEAL THEIR FAVOURITE PLACES TO STAY – FOR BUSINESS AND LEISURE.

TO STAY AT THE TOP, HOTELS AND AIRLINES MUST KEEP PACE WITH THE DEMANDS OF BUSY EXECUTIVES. IN THIS SPECIAL REPORT, THE DEAL LOOKS AT WHO'S DOING WHAT TO STAY AHEAD OF THE PACK.

It's always nice to arrive at a hotel and be given a few insider tips on the best places to eat, but it's not every day that the owner insists upon taking you for a stroll to her favourite restaurant for dinner.

Karen Merricks, director of Brisbane-based corporate travel agency Mobile Travel Agents, has experienced some of the world's best business hotels and isn't easily impressed, but that gesture by Laurence Tafanel has ensured that her hotel, Esprit Saint-Germain in Paris, is recommended to clients looking for something a little special.

Penny Spencer, the managing director of Spencer Travel in Sydney, also deals frequently with outstanding business hotels, often when passing on odd or challenging requests from travellers. Another Parisian property, the Hotel Meurice, earned her respect when it tracked down a translator at 1am for a client needing to talk business over the phone to the Middle East.

Esprit Saint-Germain and the Meurice are boutique properties, so you might expect their guests to enjoy a more personalised experience.

However, that doesn't mean large hotels can't provide equally memorable service.

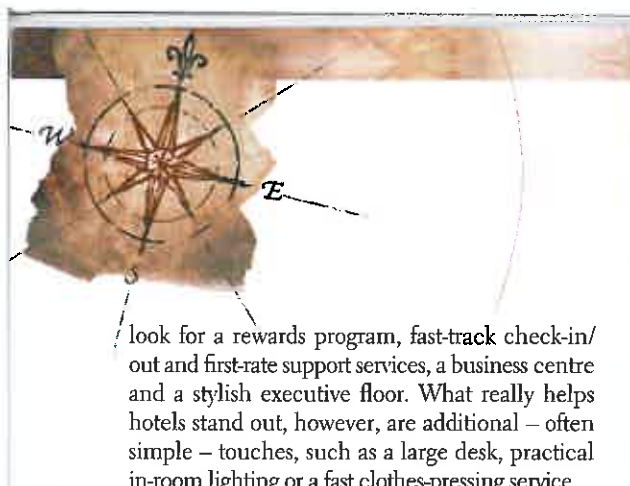
A couple of months ago a client of Suzanne Baker, owner of Perth's Broadway Travel and Cruise Centre, left a valuable personal possession in his room when he checked out of the Marriott Hotel in Vienna. "The hotel staff were unable to contact him on his mobile, so they phoned Australia to advise me of the problem and to organise the best way to return his property," Baker says. "Outstanding and honest service."

Corporate travel agents don't just deal with hotels via email or phone; they also personally inspect properties when travelling for business or pleasure. And many, such as Yvonne Verstandig, director of Executive Edge Travel and Events in Melbourne, will visit up to 20 properties each time they pass through a major city, just to ensure clients receive the best possible advice.

So what, according to the experts, defines a great business hotel? For most corporate agents, the basic criteria include a convenient location, excellent service and smart technology. They also

The Hotel Meurice in Paris (right) and the Westin in Sydney.





look for a rewards program, fast-track check-in/out and first-rate support services, a business centre and a stylish executive floor. What really helps hotels stand out, however, are additional – often simple – touches, such as a large desk, practical in-room lighting or a fast clothes-pressing service.

For Phil Hoffmann, the managing director of Phil Hoffmann Travel in Adelaide, a top-level business hotel should also offer an exceptional concierge, capable not only of sourcing the best restaurant and theatre bookings, but of offering the unique tips that make a trip memorable.

Ultimately, Baker says, when guests receive genuinely friendly service from knowledgeable staff who recognise their regulars, then “a great business hotel shouldn’t feel like a hotel at all”.

FAVOURITE HOTELS FOR WORK AND PLEASURE:

KAREN MERRICKS

Director, Mobile Travel Agents, Brisbane

Best Australian business hotel:

InterContinental, Sydney

They are experienced in dealing with, and providing confidentiality and security for, dignitaries from other countries, and they handle all business travellers’ needs with ease. Their club lounge is a spectacular space to entertain business guests, with a view to die for.

Best international business hotel:

Esprit Saint-Germain, Paris

This is my favourite for local flavour and great service, but also wonderful are the Willard InterContinental in Washington DC, the InterContinental in Madrid, the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong and the Luxe on Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles.

Favourite holiday escape:

Fiji Resort and Spa (which is managed by Hilton)

Being just a 3.5-hour flight from Australia’s east coast makes this the perfect “long weekend” getaway.

PEIRNY SPENCER

Managing director,

Spencer Travel, Sydney

Best Australian business hotel:

Park Hyatt, Melbourne

Great service, but what I liked the most was the technology in the rooms that made life easier. The rooms feature a large desk area with



Left: The Peninsula, Tokyo. Below: The Palace – The Old Town, Dubai.

accessible power points. In so many hotels, I have to crawl around on the floor to find a plug.

Best international business hotel:

Four Seasons, Hong Kong

The service is outstanding, but it’s the extra things such as having access to USB sticks and being able to book a massage later in the day after meetings. And when I left my phone in my room, it was delivered to me at no charge.

Favourite holiday escape:

Qualia, Hamilton Island;

Las Ventanas al Paraiso, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico;

If I’m in the US, I’ll fly down to Las Ventanas al Paraiso for a couple of days to re-energise.

SUZANNE BAKER

Corporate travel manager,

Broadway Travel and Cruise Centre, Perth

Best Australian business hotel:

The Westin, Sydney

I love the combination of the restored heritage section of the hotel with modern efficient amenities and spacious and comfortable rooms. The location is also central and the excellent service is quite personalised for a larger hotel.

Best international business hotel:

The Palace – The Old Town, Dubai

Personalised service, no request is too much trouble and it has local style and atmosphere.

Favourite holiday escape:

Cable Beach Club, Broome

I like warm sun, clean air and clean ocean, with access to nice food and wine. As well as Cable Beach Club, I enjoy hiring a house at

Rottneest Island or in the Queensland islands. I also love the Maldives – it’s one of the few places where you get the feeling the rest of the world could disappear and you’d never know.

YVONNE VERSTANDING

Director, Executive Edge Travel and Events, Melbourne

Best Australian business hotel:

Four Seasons, Sydney

Perfect location for business needs and the view overlooking the Opera House and Harbour Bridge is breathtaking. Impeccable service and a fantastic gym that is open 24 hours a day.

Best international business hotel:

The Peninsula, Tokyo

All rooms have a set of international adapters and an in-room fax with a private number.

The location is second to none and I loved the large bedroom, bathroom and walk-in robe.

Favourite holiday escape:

Eagle Island Camp, Botswana;

COMO Shambhala Estate, Bali

Eagle Island Camp is in the heart of the Okavango Delta and I’ve never felt so removed from my world. You can sip cocktails watching the sunset, surrounded by nature at its finest.

The COMO Shambhala Estate is 20 minutes from Ubud town centre and great for travellers with only a five-night window to recharge.

PHIL HOFFMANN

Managing director, Phil Hoffmann Travel, Adelaide

Best Australian business hotel:

Four Seasons, Sydney

Great location and Sydney’s best concierge.

It has an executive lounge, personalised check-in and in-room features and services.

Best international business hotel:

Shangri-La Valley Wing, Singapore

A free Moët champagne bar, personalised stationery, personalised business cards, private entry into the hotel, in-room check-in and welcome gifts.

Favourite holiday escape:

The Capella on Sentosa Island, Singapore

Just 15 minutes from Singapore, The Capella offers beautifully restored colonial buildings surrounded by lush rainforest. Excellent service, great villas and fantastic dining.

