



Going Undercover

Hotels are hiring a new breed of anonymous inspector to make sure everything from the bedskirts to the bellman's shoes is just right. We do some professional nitpicking at a five-star resort.



We're sitting in our spacious oceanfront casita at Esperanza, a luxurious resort perched on the cliffs of Los Cabos, Mexico, watching the waves crash dramatically against the rocks. A porter has just delivered our bags, and behind him a waiter follows bearing a tray with two kinds of iced tea served in authentic Mexican glassware. The phone rings; it's the spa. We must be tired from our trip, and would we like a head and neck massage?

But not everything is perfect. Earlier on, our bellman had given us the usual tour of this room and its various features. There were the rose petals sprinkled in the bathtub, 30 channels of satellite television in two languages, Veuve Clicquot in the minibar. But he forgot to tell us something—the location of the hair dryer. It's on his list of things to tell all guests. Mental note to self: tsk, tsk.

Okay, we're being picky. But it turns out we've come to this five-star hotel on a mission—to serve as a hotel inspector. Across the country, hotels say they are under new pressures from an increasingly discerning public to put the “serve” back in service—especially with rates hitting new record highs this year. So these hospitality spies are paid handsomely to come in, spend up to 48 hours at a hotel and scrutinize it for everything from the quality of the linens to whether the curtains provide a complete blackout when closed. They are paid by the hotels—who also pick up the tab



✓ THE MINIBAR TEST:
Are all the labels front and center?

upon checkout—and their findings are usually not made public. But hoteliers say that in the increasingly competitive lodging market, inspectors like these are a necessary evil. “They’re the gatekeepers of service,” says John Fox, senior vice president of PKF Consulting.

In this case, we’re on the job with one of the toughest inspectors in the business: Trent Walsh, whose company handles all the inspections for Leading Hotels of the World, a group of 420 of the world’s most upscale hotel properties. Walsh and his team of 19 inspectors spend 120 days a year on the road staying at these places, doing roughly 650 inspections annually. We decided to see just what this process was all about and accompanied Walsh on a recent jaunt—only we also decided to do a little inspecting ourselves. So we checked in, grabbed a copy of the elaborate checklist and went undercover at Esperanza, a 56-room, five-star hotel where rates start at \$425. A cursory look at the Web site told us we were in for quite an experience: A collection of oceanfront suites perched on a cliff over the crashing waves of the Sea of Cortez, this was a Frette-linen, infinity-edge pool, staff-addresses-you-by-name kind of place. But would it get anything



INSPECTORS CHECK if appetizers are suggested and whether lights are dimmed at turndown.

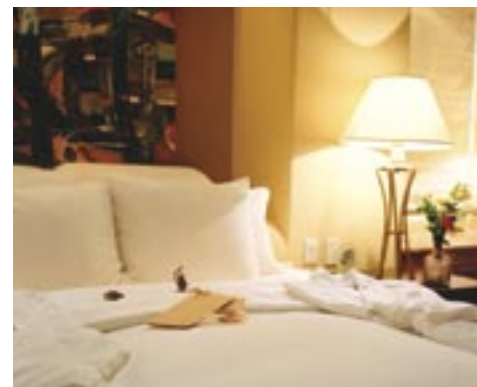
wrong? Walsh assured us that it would—in his 10 years as an inspector, he says, no one has gotten a perfect score. “They *all* make mistakes,” he says, very seriously.

When you arrive at Esperanza, all you can see is the ocean; the lobby practically spills over into the waves, while the resort’s rooms form a crescent around the ocean and the property’s *pièce de résistance*, the sparkling blue infinity pool. We soon realized that we wouldn’t be spending much time there. Walsh had sent us a copy of the Excel checklist that forms the basis of the inspection, and when we opened it, we found a spreadsheet with no fewer than 1,200 questions in 30 different categories, ranging from check-in to turndown service to six separate meals—inspectors are required to have two dinners, two “light meals” and two

breakfasts. Seventy-five percent of the standards focus on service, with the remainder focusing on the facilities, and the questions range from the general (“Was the guest greeted in a warm and friendly manner?”) to the highly specific (“Were [minibar] contents neatly arranged with labels facing outward?”). There were 26 questions about the check-in process alone.

This was an amazingly plush place, and fittingly, there were 54 standards to scrutinize just for the room itself. Yes, the layout was functional, and yes, there was individually controlled bedside lighting (assuming you could pull yourself up from the 13 puffy white pillows to reach it). Indeed, the room was so spotless that it even passed the one standard Walsh says hotels always miss: dust-free picture frames. (“Those pictures go up once, and no one touches

them again,” he says.) We started getting into the swing of things, flipping on and off all the lights, opening and closing the minibar to check that it didn’t wobble, and running a finger across the soap dish to make sure it was dry. We deducted points for a few misses: There was no grab rail on the bathtub, no pen by the phone and no phone in the bathroom, a newer, more nitpicky standard. (“I wouldn’t want it myself, but



it's become expected," Walsh says.) Beyond that, the bedskirt was scuffed—another common problem, according to Walsh—and we deducted a final point for a notable and highly egregious absence of Q-tips in the bathroom. This was getting to be fun.

Naturally, we were curious to compare notes with Walsh. We planned to have dinner at the hotel's main restaurant, a three-level, open-air space surrounding a thatched hut, serving seasonal Mediterranean cuisine. We met just outside the entrance, and Walsh immediately told us he was relieved to have the company. His primary concern is not attracting attention, and he says solo diners at such upscale properties tend to raise eyebrows. Walsh says he's detected around 4 percent of the time, and when it happens the entire trip becomes a useless exercise. "Everyone's just falling all over you," he says. The BlackBerry, in fact, has done a lot to help him keep his cover; instead of ducking into the men's room a few times per meal to jot down observations, he now types them out to himself at the table as an e-mail. A waiter assumes that Walsh is a hard-driving master of the universe connecting with the office, not a spy who's jotting down his name and the fact that he forgot to crumb the table, which was the case here.

But that gaffe was slight; the rest of the meal was near perfect. And even the hotel inspector who's seen it all found it hard not to be wowed at our dramatic surroundings. The entire restaurant was lit with flaming torches, and we ate perched on a cliff overlooking the waves that



every so often sprayed just close enough to elicit gasps from our fellow diners. We discussed our findings; Walsh's bedskirt was a bit scuffed too, and he also informed us that there probably were Q-tips in our room after all, suggesting we look in a second jar (he was right).

Things weren't always this persnickety. The inspection process for Leading Hotels of the World used to be so lax it was almost pointless: Inspectors were retired general managers who would announce their visits, get VIP treatment from the hotel's general manager and

write a glowing letter saying the hotel had passed. But after hotel managers started to complain they weren't getting honest feedback, and as service started to become more important across the industry, the association decided to outsource the process. It hired Walsh, 40, a friendly, laid-back Canadian who favors khakis and polo shirts. Working with the brass of Leading Hotels and tapping into his decade of hotel-management experience—Walsh had clocked food and beverage stints at Edwardian Hotels, Intercontinental and Sun International in South Africa before opening his own inspection firm—he came up with the stringent, quantifiable system.

And quantifiable it is. Hotels are rated on a score of 1 to 100; to maintain the Leading Hotel imprimatur, a property has to maintain a score above 73 (the average score is 82). If a hotel scores below the minimum, it gets placed on a six-month probation, and if it doesn't shape

Picky, Picky Most hotel companies have some sort of anonymous inspection process in place. But the process varies among chains. Some examples: **—Renée DeFranco**

| HOTEL | NUMBER OF PROPERTIES | INSPECTION FREQUENCY | COMMENT |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Ritz-Carlton | 61 | Twice a year | An outside firm conducts a two-part inspection of each hotel: one announced review and one anonymous "mystery shop" that tests 260 standards and 22 service scenarios. The company says it uses the process to improve service, not to drop any property. |
| Hilton | 480 | At least twice a year | A team of in-house auditors inspects hotels using a weighted-point system: The condition of the property's sidewalk gets one point; bedding cleanliness is worth 600. Hotels that fail three consecutive inspections are kicked out—last year four were removed for that reason. |
| Marriott Hotels & Resorts | 515 | Once a year, plus annual "self-audit" | The chain used to do unannounced mystery shops; now it does announced inspections, scheduled 30 days in advance. A spokesperson for Marriott says the company doesn't disclose how many properties fail each year. |
| Preferred Hotel Group | 325 | Once a year | Inspections are unannounced, but hotels can provide 75 blackout dates of their choosing—usually during conventions and peak times—when inspectors are not allowed. Inspectors bring families to some properties to test out kids' programs (and to help them keep their cover). |

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Smart Spending

Smart Traveler



 **ROOM AND SERVICE** During a 48-hour stay, inspectors are required to have two breakfasts, two dinners and two “light meals”—including room service twice.

up, it gets kicked out. But that's rare; of 420 hotels, an average of three per year are asked to leave. Of course, it's in the company's interest to keep the hotels in the fold. After all, Leading Hotels of the World makes its money off of membership dues. But from Walsh's perspective, keeping out the underperformers is more important, and in addition to the few who get booted, a dozen or so are placed on probation every year.

Not that Esperanza would come anywhere close to that. After we spent another day scrutinizing the place, including testing room service (which came in at a commendable 91.3 for me), it was time to blow our cover. At the end of each audit, after checking out, Walsh reveals himself to the hotel general manager, then sits down and goes over the completed report. In this case, General Manager Severino Gomez gritted his teeth as Walsh revealed some of the things that went wrong. He was pleased with his overall rating, which, at 84.3, was excellent (working on an

abridged version of the checklist, we gave it an 81.7), but Gomez cringed when Walsh told him about some problems that arose during turndown service, one of Esperanza's biggest weaknesses last inspection. He also winced when he learned of some check-in lapses and shook his head in disbelief at one particularly flagrant gaffe we'd experienced the night before: While dining at the resort's newer, more casual restaurant, we had asked for a bowl of ice cream for dessert and were told that there was none to be had—despite the fact that the hotel had three restaurants. “He was devastated,” says Walsh of the revelations. “They always are.”

Still, Gomez appreciated the process and the findings and gave Walsh a baseball cap before sending him on his way. For his part, Walsh was headed to another hotel up the road for a spa inspection. It was the last day of a 10-day tour, and he was wiped. So was I. “People imagine that it's a great job, but the reality is, it's a job just like any other job,” Walsh says. “It's a grind.” 