

Top travel jobs: Nothing escapes this guy

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

Rancho Mirage, Calif. — If you didn't know Trent Walsh is only doing his job, you'd swear he was one of the world's great scam artists.



A good look: Hotel inspector Trent Walsh is meticulous (though he doesn't use white gloves and a magnifying glass). Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

The drill: He checks into a luxury hotel for a couple of nights, running up bar and restaurant tabs, ordering room service, getting spa treatments and generally having the run of the place. Then, at checkout, he tells the manager exactly what he thinks of the lodging and presents the bill to him or her.

Walsh usually gets a heartfelt thank-you for his efforts.

As the managing director of Leading Quality Assurance, a London-based hotel inspection company, Walsh and 13 employees

anonymously check into hotels, including the 420 members of the upscale Leading Hotels of the World group, to see whether they're up to snuff.

At the moment, he's seated at a terrace table at the Lodge at Rancho Mirage, where the desert air is as cool and dry as the glass of California white wine he's sipping. The only signal that he's chewing on more than the seared beef tenderloin before him is that he periodically glances at his watch, then excuses himself before a trio of chocolate desserts arrives, to jot down notes in private.

Did the waiter offer chair and napkin assistance? Did he promote appetizers and dessert? Was the order taken within 10 minutes of being seated? Was wine poured from the bottle at the table?

By the time Walsh checks out in two days, he'll have compiled a 120-page report that scores the sprawling resort in 28 areas and will include 40 or so pages of narrative comments, plus digital photos. Its score will ultimately determine whether the resort remains in the Leading Hotels group.

Walsh, 40, is a seasoned hotel aficionado. After college, he traveled the world, then worked in hotels in London and South Africa, where he came up with the idea of starting his own hotel auditing firm. But don't compare his job to that of a "secret shopper."

"It dumbs it down," he says. His employees are experienced in the luxury hotel trade and can stand up to a general manager who asks them how they have the audacity to judge the hotel.

The standards, based 75% on service, are precise and leave little room for personal preference. Not that a man who spends 10 nights or so a month in swank hotels peppered throughout 80 countries doesn't have favorites. Ask Walsh about them and he takes off on a global flight of fancy.

"Datai Langkawi in Malaysia — a cool Asian Zen concept and impeccable service. The Beverly Hills Hotel because it's fun. The Oberoi Vanyavilas in India — tents on the edge of a tiger preserve. The Peninsula in Hong Kong because it's just how a hotel should be run. Claridges in London — it's so beautiful."

And he's just getting started.