

STAY SAFE

From cleaning protocols to touchless technology, hotels are rethinking every aspect of their operations to protect their guests and staff

As we all know, the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked huge damage on the hospitality industry. To keep afloat, hotels have had to adapt quickly to new regulations, redesigning spaces and enhancing cleaning to keep customers and staff safe.

Guests, too, have changed their behaviour. Whereas once they may not have thought much about the work that goes on behind the scenes, now travellers prioritise hygiene when booking. According to a survey carried out in the UK and US by Honeywell in December, 48 per cent of respondents said that enhanced cleanliness or health and safety procedures would motivate them the most to stay in a hotel, while 57 per cent of those in the US cited cleanliness as the top deciding factor in choosing a property. Here we explore the new safety measures that have fundamentally changed the guest experience.

KEEP IT CLEAN

All of the major hotel chains have developed robust new cleaning protocols, reviewing each department and providing staff with comprehensive safety and hygiene training. In April last year, Marriott International unveiled its Global Cleanliness Council, a body comprising

specialists in hospitality, epidemiology, sanitation and protective health and hygiene technology. Hilton partnered with the manufacturers of Lysol and Dettol to launch its Clean Stay platform in June 2020, with Alex Humphrey, Hilton's senior director for safety and security in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, using his experience as a medical microbiologist to steer the group in the right direction. "The key thing is it's not just a marketing ploy," he says. "We approached this with a scientific microbiological mindset. We weren't like a rabbit [caught] in the headlights."

Such programmes tend to undergo external certification and auditing. Accor's Allsafe scheme, for example, is endorsed by testing and inspection specialist Bureau Veritas, while last autumn its protocols in the UK and Ireland secured government backing. Radisson Hotel Group has signed a global agreement with inspection company SGS to create a 20-step cleaning and safety regime.

At a local level, some groups have appointed "Covid officers" responsible for making sure that individual properties adhere to guidelines. At IHG Hotels and Resorts, "clean champions" instil a "culture of clean" across its portfolio, while Hyatt ensures that every hotel globally has a trained hygiene and wellbeing leader.

Health and security companies such as International SOS have provided support to the likes of Four Seasons and Oakwood. Medical directors test out the user experience and compile reports with recommendations for properties.

What do these programmes entail? Each varies slightly and is tweaked to meet regulations in different parts of the world but, by and large, the hotel groups have a similar approach to hygiene. First and foremost, traditional cleaning measures have been stepped up. In public areas, high-contact surfaces such as reception counters, lift buttons, door handles, bathrooms, handrails and gym equipment are cleaned more frequently with hospital-grade disinfectant products, and sanitising stations have been set up.

In guestrooms, high-touch areas such as door handles, taps and light switches receive special attention. Groups such as Accor promise deep cleaning of upholstery and carpets and high-temperature washing of bedding. Many chains also provide disinfecting wipes or hand sanitisers in each room. →

MAIN PICTURE: Accor's Allsafe programme has changed the check-in experience
BELOW: Hilton's room seals reassure guests



BELOW: Accor has worked with companies such as AXA on its new services for guests

While much of this work remains invisible, Hilton reassures guests by attaching a Clean Stay seal label to guestroom doors to show that no one has entered since housekeeping. "That helped to reduce anxiety and give great customer confidence," says Humphrey, who previously worked in the NHS as an infection control adviser.

Housekeeping itself has changed, with some guests wanting a full service and others preferring that no one enters during their stay. Rooms are thoroughly disinfected pre-arrival but it is then up to guests to choose the frequency of service. In times of low occupancy, Accor will keep rooms vacant for 72 hours to further reduce transmission risk.

According to Honeywell, 93 per cent of respondents who had stayed in a hotel since March of last year reported a positive experience regarding safety and cleanliness.

Humphrey reports that Hilton's measures have "gone down an absolute storm" with customers, while Richard Short, Accor's health, safety and environment director for Northern Europe, encourages guests to shape the future of the hotel experience by providing constructive feedback. "We invite guests to join us on this journey because we all have the same motives. We don't want this virus to spread uncontrollably," he says.

Some hotel groups have gone even further, deploying advanced technologies such as electrostatic spraying. Marriott deployed this in public areas in properties across all of its brands. It works by applying an electric charge to hospital-grade disinfectant, enabling it to cover a surface more effectively than conventional methods. The rollout was not a simple endeavour – research was undertaken to discover how often it could be used and the consequences of inhaling the fumes. "Like anything that's new, you want to make sure it's safe and that you're not inadvertently causing harm", Arielle Quick, Marriott's chief continent lodging services officer for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, says. IHG has introduced the technology in select hotels.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Still, while such methods play their part in stopping the virus in its tracks, it is human behaviour that is most important. The World Health Organisation warns that person-to-person contact is the main way to spread Covid-19, meaning technology is rendered obsolete if basic elements such as hand hygiene, face coverings and social distancing are not observed. As Dr Rodrigo Rodriguez-Fernandez, global medical director of non-communicable disease and workplace wellness for International SOS, puts it: "I can have the best and most expensive air →

'You can have the best air purifier system but if people are not following the rules then it doesn't really matter'



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BELOW: An Ibis property in India prepares a room for the next guest

purifier system... but if people are not following the rules then it doesn't really matter." Short agrees that "it's important to use the tried and tested" methods.

Properties have therefore reconfigured public areas to allow for social distancing as well as introducing signage and making mask-wearing in public areas mandatory. Front desks may have Perspex partition screens and one-way systems are often in place, with separate entrances and exits. Gyms and spas may be closed or limited in terms of guest numbers. Some hotels are also using thermal screening and temperature guns.

So what happens in the case of a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19 on-site? First, the hotel will make sure the individual is safe and quarantined. It will then notify local authorities (in the case of NHS Test and Trace, the guest or staff member can do this themselves) and follow the recommended next steps. Following the guest's departure, the room will be isolated for 72 hours and then deep cleaned.

TOUCH-FREE TECH

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of contactless technology enabling travellers to control their stay from mobile devices. Apps are increasingly being introduced for guests to check in and out remotely, order room service

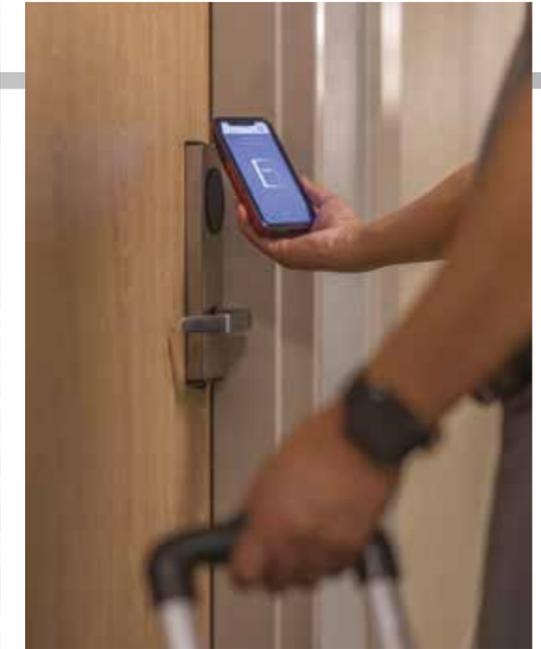
and amenities, speak with staff using instant messaging and make special requests.

For a few years now, Hilton, Marriott and Hyatt have offered secure digital keys to loyalty scheme members, allowing them to bypass the front desk and unlock their doors using their phones. The global rollout of this technology has been accelerated by the pandemic. As of April 2021, Hilton guests had used the digital key to open 105 million doors worldwide, with 80 per cent of the group's hotels now using the technology. More than 500 Hyatt properties had the digital key by the end of last year, while 4,500 Marriott International hotels have it.

Accor followed suit in January this year, partnering with mobile key provider Stay My Way to launch the technology at select European, Middle Eastern and North American hotels – Ibis Styles London Gloucester Road was the first in the UK to get it. Accor says 20,000 doors will be equipped with it by the end of the year and that it will be rolled out to at least 50 per cent of the portfolio in the next five years.

Low-touch travel is here to stay – still, hotel groups are adamant that this will not be at the expense of hospitality. Humphrey cites how Hilton team members across the group have adapted their service during the pandemic, adopting different gestures to communicate – one example

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FROM LEFT: Public areas get special attention in Hilton's Clean Stay regime; Hyatt keyless room entry

is staff placing hands on their heart and using expressive eyes when interacting with guests. "I've been bowled over by how our teams have adapted to these new gestures of hospitality," he says – a sentiment I can agree with, having experienced a warm welcome when I stayed at the Hart Shoreditch Hotel London, Curio Collection by Hilton (see [business traveller.com/tried-and-tested](https://www.business traveller.com/tried-and-tested)).

FOOD AND DRINK

Whether you're staying at a budget hotel or a luxury resort, you will notice how food and drink services have been affected. Restaurants may have been shut, turned into takeaway outlets or had their menus streamlined to simplify operations. In October, Accor teamed up with London-based software company Bizzon to allow guests to pay online for food from a digital menu or charge items to their room. Active at 91 properties, the plan is to roll it out to 150 hotels across Northern Europe, 72 of them in the UK.

Where restaurants remain open, they have been rearranged to create more space between tables and have introduced disposable, laminated or digital menus. Buffet-style service has survived in some hotels after being adapted for the new era, with cooked food served by staff and guests able to pick up pre-packaged items. Marriott's Quick says: "People love the hotel buffet. As operators and hoteliers, we want to keep our guests safe but also want to provide an experience that feels luxurious or special." Restaurants may even separate teams who touch equipment before or after it has been in contact with customers, as Hyatt does.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Following more than a year of – yes, that word – unprecedented scenarios, it may be futile to try to forecast the future. Still, thanks to the rollout of vaccines there

is hopefully an end in sight. If there is any silver lining to come out of all of this, it is that "every company has become a healthcare company", Rodriguez-Fernandez says. "Never before have we seen conversations about health in a non-health sector company. Our hope is that this will remain." Accor has worked with AXA to provide guests with free 24-hour access to telemedicine consultations across its global portfolio of more than 5,000 hotels, a partnership that will continue beyond the pandemic.

There are undoubtedly difficult times ahead. PwC's UK Hotels Forecast 2020-21 predicts that it could take four years for occupancy to return to pre-Covid levels. It forecasts occupancy rates this year of 52.4 per cent for London and 59.2 per cent for the regions, compared with 83.4 per cent and 75.4 per cent respectively in 2019.

"Hospitality is resilient and has proven to be so time and again," says Srdjan Milekovic, Hyatt's senior vice-president of operations for EMEA. "While the industry is in a tough position now, we know it will recover." The group recently announced plans to grow its footprint in Europe by more than 30 per cent. "We know there is pent-up demand for travel and once our guests are ready, we will be ready," he says.

At the same time, the pandemic has generated an increase in remote working lifestyles. "One cool trend that has come out of the pandemic is that hotels need to cater for people who are no longer trapped in an office environment", says Tom Flanagan Karttunen, Radisson Hotel Group's area senior vice-president for Northern and Western Europe, who typically travels for 50 per cent of the year. That's true both for individual guests seeking an alternative space in which to work and for virtual participants in corporate gatherings. See the following pages for how hotels are adapting their meeting and event offerings for the new era. **BT**

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