HOTEL CHECK-IN; One-Upping the Mint on the Pillow

By TERRY TRUCCO

MOST guests expect to answer a question or two when they reserve a hotel room. But the questions often go beyond whether you want a no-smoking room or a morning paper these days. At the Nob Hill Lambourne in San Francisco, guests are asked if they would like to use a free laptop computer during their stay.

At the Hotel Monaco in Seattle, the registration clerk asks if guests would like a goldfish in the room.

"It's called amenities creep," said James J. Eyster, H.V.S. Professor of Hotel Real Estate and Finance at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. Chances are good you'll be its beneficiary or victim, depending on your sentiments, the next time you check into a hotel room.

From Tokyo to Tampa, guests staying almost anywhere except the most proudly budget-conscious establishments are being showered with perks, some silly, some truly sublime.

They can be subtle, like the prethreaded needles in the sewing kits at most hotels in the Ritz-Carlton chain. Or lavish: a seamstress is sent to the room when guests at the Phoenician in Scottsdale, Ariz., have something that needs mending. They can be small luxuries you can use while in the hotel, like the binoculars in each room of the towering Mandarin Oriental Hotel in San Francisco. Or modest mementos to take home, like the perky green and peppermint-pink cardboard hatboxes filled with bath accessories at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Others seem designed simply to promote good will -- and good P.R. To celebrate its 120th anniversary in 1996, the Grand Hotel National in Lucerne, Switzerland, planted nearly 10,000 trees in wooded areas in and around the city -- one in honor of every guest who stayed at the hotel that year.

"Amenities are a way for hotels to differentiate themselves from other properties," Mr. Eyster explained. "Once one hotel starts offering something, like extra thick bathrobes or frequent flier miles, they all have to do it, like keeping up with the Joneses."

It's tempting, and probably quite accurate, to imagine hundreds of hotel managers and their staffs throughout the world sipping coffee at big round tables, trying to dream up new room goodies or...
an unusual treat to leave at bed turndown time. "One of the challenges for our assistant manager is to constantly come up with new programs and new amenities," said Sally Cooper, a spokesperson at the Phoenician.

Stan Kott, manager of the Monaco, got the idea of supplying each room with a goldfish in a sleek, round bowl after watching a retrospective on the life of Jacques Cousteau this past summer. "Since most people can't travel with their pets and get lonely for them, we thought we'd put pets in the rooms of people who wanted them," he said.

As with many perks, the Monaco's goldfish are an added chore and expense for the hotel. Besides investing in a tank large enough to hold about 200 fish, which is kept in the housekeeping department, the hotel hired a consultant to train the staff in the care, cleaning and feeding of fancy goldfish, a prettier, more resilient variety than the classic comet goldfish that kids win at county fairs. Guests are encouraged to name the fish (a name card is supplied) but are not allowed to feed them or take them home. After nearly four months, Mr. Kott considers the goldfish a success. "We have 189 rooms and last night 170 guests requested little companions," he said.

In contrast, some of the most agreeable amenities cost hotels relatively little in time and effort. The Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Mass., has a children's storyline built into each guest phone. You push a button, turn on the speaker, and a taped three-minute story like "A Day on the Farm" and "Pokey Little Puppy's Naughty Day" is recited by a professional reader. At the Novotel in New York guests are provided with a discount shopping guide. And guests at the London Mews Hilton who miss their pets can walk the hotel dog, Pierre, an 8-year-old springer spaniel, through nearby Hyde Park.

At the Hotel Bijou in San Francisco, a small theater off the lobby shows movies filmed in San Francisco, such as "Birdman of Alcatraz," nightly free of charge, accompanied by free coffee and tea.

Amenities creep is a relatively new phenomenon, particularly in the mass-market end of the hotel industry. The notion of equipping a room with such mundane items as bathrobes and shampoo was not even a consideration at most hotels until as recently as the 1970's. "Back in the 50's, when you stopped at a chain like Best Western, you were lucky to get a paper-thin bar of soap," Mr. Eyster said.

By the 1970's, shampoos and bath amenities were de rigueur at large chain hotels like Marriott, Sheraton and Hilton, as were bed turndown and frequent flier miles a decade later. And during the 90's, guests have come to expect dedicated fax lines in the rooms and, increasingly, in-room fax machines, though, like telephones, there is usually a charge to use them.

Costs for these extras are carried by the hotel owners and are ultimately built into the hotel's pricing system, Mr. Eyster added. "All the hotel chains would rather not have the frequent flier program, but they can't stop offering it now."

Not surprisingly, many of the most distinctive amenities are lavished only on guests paying for
suites or rooms on special executive floors. The Excelsior in Hong Kong, for example, recently started leaving a roll of Kodak film and a free subway ticket to Tsimshatsui, a nearby visitor destination, but only in the rooms of corporate guests. And free tubes of Dead Sea mud, said to be rich in therapeutic qualities, are placed in suites, but not ordinary rooms, at the Hiltons in Tel Aviv, Beer-Sheva and Jerusalem.

SOME hotels also offer seasonal perks. During the holidays, the Parker Meridien in New York greets guests with homemade cookies, and on Valentine's Day, chocolates and flowers are offered. And in the weeks before Christmas, the Maxwell Hotel in San Francisco will leave a $25 to $100 gift certificate for one of the Union Square stores such as Macy's under the pillow of one of its guests, chosen randomly, every night.

The flurry of amenities is most intense -- and democratic -- at luxury hotels, where bathrobes, flowers, chocolates, shoe shines, mineral water and a lavish assortment of bath products, often in generous sizes, are taken for granted when you book a room. Hotels like the St. Regis in New York and the Lanesborough in London will press a garment free of charge when a guest arrives. The Trump International in New York supplies personalized business cards and stationery even for stays of one night. And frequent guests at the Beverly Hills, which has private phone lines to each room, are given a permanent telephone number to use during stays so they can have business cards printed with their hotel phone and address.

A number of hotels keep files on guest preferences, from the type of music they want on CDs in the room to dietary requirements. Achieving homeliness in a gilded setting seems the latest goal. The Lanesborough recently began placing candy dishes with wrapped sweets in rooms, as well as current hard-back novels by authors like John Le Carre and Maeve Binchy (guests who become immersed in a book can purchase it for $8.75). Guests at the Carefree Resorts, like the Boulders in Carefree, Ariz., are treated to freshly baked cookies at turndown, while customers who frequent the Beverly Hills are given their own room key with their initials engraved.

Perhaps the most sumptuous amenities, however, are the costly ones designed to serve a narrow but notable segment of the hotel population. Consider the Music Chamber at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Conceived as a practice room for musicians staying there, this 700-square-foot sound-proofed room, available without charge to guests, has a Steinway piano, video and audio recording equipment -- and room service. The music room, after all, is in a hotel.

Photos: Frequent guests at the Beverly Hills Hotel get a personalized key. (Monica Almeida/The New York Times); Listening to a bedtime story at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge. (Paula Lerner for The New York Times); Hotel Monaco in Seattle offers guests goldfish for their room. (Doug Wilson for The New York Times)(pg. 10); Practicing in private at the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo. (Stuart Isett for The New York Times)(pg. 24)