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Pillow Talk



By Lisa McLaughlin

It wasn't long ago that the one thing a hotel didn't promise was the thing it nominally exists to provide: a good night's sleep. Beyond a wake-up call and a chocolate on the pillow, it was all up to the guest. Those days are long gone. Hotels both large and small are engaged in a battle to see who can be the most luxurious, and at the center of the war is the bed. That chocolate is now likely to be imported and artisanally made; the pillow, covered in a 400-thread-count, organically grown cotton case and accompanied by other fluffy luxuries, all designed with sleep in mind.

Hotels competing to offer the best in sleep are creating super-slumber chambers, with soft lighting, modified minibars stocked with herbal teas, and more. Take the KN Tranquility Suite, created for the Hotel Monaco in Chicago by pajama designer Karen Neuberger, with soothing colors and luxe bamboo bedding. Or consider the Fairmont Washington D.C., where the sleep menu includes a de-stress neck massage, an in-room yoga sleep class, herbal teas or smoothies with lavender cookies, and a teddy bear. "It does help," says business traveler Emily Gilden, whose frequent trips often left her weary until she started exploring hotels that had sleep amenities. "I'm less cranky about being away from home."

For overworked Americans, sleep and the products that promise a good night of it have become an obsession. "Whether our guests are traveling for business or pleasure, one of the most important things they want is a good night's sleep," says Von DeLuna, general manager of the Hotel Burnham in Chicago, where guests can check out any of eight kinds of pillows from the hotel's pillow library. "We have a 100% natural buckwheat-hull pillow; a snore-reducing pillow, which really works; full-length body pillows; special eye pillows--whatever people need to sleep better." DeLuna notes that while guests travel to experience something new, when it comes to the bed, they often want to replicate the comforts of their own. "We used to have lots of people bringing their pillows from home with them," he says.

At New York's City's 70 Park Avenue Hotel, general manager Ericka Nelson agrees that everything starts with the pillow, a belief she came by the hard way. Her husband snores, and it took the right selection of pillows to keep her comfortable and him quiet throughout the night. "When we check into a hotel," she says, "the first thing that we do is divide up the pillows." On March 3, her hotel will open its own pillow library to celebrate National Sleep Awareness Week, but it has been in the sleep-amenities game for a while. The hotel already offers Frette sheets, with matching pajamas available; DVDs of yoga sleep techniques; and a natural chocolate drink called the Dreamerz Chocolate S'nores.

Other hotels are designing sleep amenities to fit their individual personalities. At La Mansion del Rio in San Antonio, handcrafted worry dolls are placed in rooms every night, a nod to Yanaguana folklore, which promises that your cares will evaporate by dawn if you transfer them to the dolls as you sleep. The Milliken Creek Inn & Spa in Napa Valley, Calif., offers a package that includes the Good Night Sleep Kit by Deepak Chopra. And at the Hard Rock Hotel San Diego, the "vibe manager" will create a playlist of mellow music (ranging from Simon and Garfunkel to Morcheeba) as part of its turndown service.

The Benjamin Hotel in New York City perhaps goes the furthest to ensure slumber. It actually guarantees a restful night. If you don't sleep as well as at home, it will refund the cost of your stay. The hotel improves its odds with a secret weapon: sleep concierge Anya Orlanska, who contacts guests by e-mail before arrival to determine their preferences and needs. "I would say 80% of our guests take advantage of this service," she says. Orlanska helps them choose from 11 types of pillows, including hypoallergenic and water-filled models, a jelly neck roll and a 5-ft. (1.5 m) body cushion. The rooms have blackout curtains and soundproof windows. "We also can arrange for spa treatments, comfort foods like peanut butter and jelly or milk and cookies before bed and white-noise machines," she says.

Lullabies aren't included at the Benjamin, but at the hotel Andaz in London, columnist and BBC playwright Damian Barr will read bedtime stories to guests all through March. Sweet dreams.

