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WEALTH MATTERS

## A \$2,000 Room and a Stale Pastry? What to Do if Luxury Travel Goes Awry

By PAUL SULLIVAN

Cristina Verger, a wedding and event planner, arrived at the Hotel Boscolo in Milan eager to mix business with pleasure. With the hotel's room rates topping \$2,000 a night, her expectations were high.

But a series of small mistakes by the staff accumulated to nearly ruin what should have been a relaxing stay. It started when Ms. Verger, who was born in Italy but lives in New York, spoke in Italian at check-in but the receptionist would answer only in English.

The next morning, she ordered a cappuccino and a croissant to her room. The coffee "was lukewarm, brown water," she said, and the pastry was stale.

One night at the hotel's rooftop bar, a friend asked a waiter for an iPhone charger. "He said, 'There's one at the front desk,'" Ms. Verger said. "I said: 'Excuse me, we're on the terrace. I'm not going to get one at the front desk.'"

The breaking point was on her last day when she couldn't print her boarding pass; the hotel staff said the public printer was being repaired. "A printer costs, like, \$80," she said. "Who sends it out to be fixed?"

Such problems do not rise to the horror of bedbugs in the sheets. But with sky-high room rates that promise five-star comforts, amenities and services, high-end hotels and restaurants need to be mindful of the reputational hit they can take when they fail to pamper their guests. In turn, those guests need to know how they can salvage an experience that isn't going the way they expected.

To avoid bad memories, travel professionals and hotel employees say, guests should sound the alarm early.

Mark Ellwood, a contributing editor at Condé Nast Traveler and the author of several travel books, said that going to the general manager with specifics such as an employee's name, where the problem occurred and when it happened gave credibility to a complaint.

People should also think of what they want changed. "Complaining is never constructive when you say, 'I had a terrible night's sleep; make it better,'" he said. "But saying: 'I had a terrible night's sleep last night. Could you move me to a higher floor and pack me?' they'll do it."

Mr. Ellwood also advised people to register for a hotel's loyalty program before going. It



KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cristina Verger at her home in Manhattan. She alerted a manager to problems at a luxury hotel in Milan, and they were

shows the guest is a frequent visitor, or has the potential to be.

And the complaints of high-end travelers are usually of the type that can be avoided — and would seem easy to fix. What should travelers do, particularly when what they want is a great experience and not the free nights or drinks that get rolled out to make amends?

Ms. Verger said that during her stay at the Hotel Boscolo, she sought out a manager to fix her problems — and they were fixed. Most memorably, she said, the day after her disappointing breakfast, she got a cappuccino to her liking and fresh, tasty pastries.

"When these problems were addressed politely and firmly — I don't believe in yelling — they were fixed," she said. "I'd go back and stay in that hotel."

Ms. Verger's story struck a chord with me. It reminded me of similar hotel problems I'd had. Over Presidents' Day weekend, I was with my family at the Four Seasons in Baltimore, where rooms range from \$350 a night to over \$2,500.

On the first night, we waited

nearly an hour for ice and water to be brought up. On the second day, we returned to our room at 3 p.m., and it hadn't been cleaned. On the third day, we had to talk our way into brunch in the hotel restaurant — even though we were staying there.

There was another time, at the Ritz-Carlton in Miami Beach, where my wife and I were celebrating a birthday without our children. Rooms with a view of the ocean hover around \$1,000 a night in the winter.

We had a beautiful beachfront room on a high floor. We also had a family with small, stampeding children next door. When we asked the front desk if it could move us, our only option was a room on a low floor overlooking noisy Collins Avenue. We declined.

None of these mishaps ruined our trips, but they were frustrating — and remain memorable.

When asked about the shortcomings of my stay at the Four Seasons in Baltimore, Julien Carralero, the general manager, said that a guest with a problem, however small, should call a manager at once.

"The fact that we get an early warning sign from the guest — we like that," he said. "We're going to pay a little more attention to a guest who has rung the bell. I'm going to notify all the surrounding departments to make sure that guest gets the extra care."

He said his hotel logged all

If you're paying top dollar, it's wise to contact a manager as soon as possible.

complaints internally to guest's stay visitors. (As rattled off we called the fr we had com

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and nearby Bal Harbour that people should call in advance to state their

ences. "This allows our guests team to best tailor anticipate their needs, if anything from preferred location to special celeb reservations," he said.

But Mr. Ellwood said people should not expect royal treatment if they d for it. "If you've bought room on an auction site, an astonishingly small a for it, you should adjust expectations," he said. "I paid \$500 a night for a \$ suite, you're going to get smallest room in that su

lection."

Being calm when something goes wrong certainly helps. David Fox, a vascular surgeon in Manhattan, was relaxing over lunch during a medical conference at the Palazzo hotel in Las Vegas. He ordered a favorite dish — linguine with clam sauce — and a glass of wine.

"I was in a totally different state of mind than my high-stress surgeries," Dr. Fox said. "I

see the waiter approaching with several dishes on his tray. He passed behind me. All of a sudden I feel a warm, wet sensation going down my back."

That was the clam sauce from his lunch, soaking his blazer. Instead of standing up and yelling, Dr. Fox remained calm — "No one was going to die here," he recalled — and waited to see what the staff would do.

"They took my jacket, tried to dry it, said they'd pay for the dry cleaning," he said. "I stayed nonplused because I was in Vegas. They brought me another clam linguine. They said the meal was on the house. Then they asked for my room number, which was a little strange."

The next day he received a \$500 gift certificate for Barneys New York to buy a new blazer. Dr. Fox never used it, he said, but the gesture stuck with him.

"When I tell my friends, they say, 'Oh, didn't you yell and scream at the waiter?'" he said. "For me, it was about understanding that things happen. It's not anyone's fault. They'll make good on it."

Not all restaurant mishaps have such happy endings. And restaurants themselves have different problems from hotels because most people are there for just a few hours, not a few days.

should be proactive. "The guest orchestrates his own good time in a restaurant," Mr. Nieporent said. "Survey the restaurant. If you see a lot of people, order right away so your order doesn't get stuck behind a party of eight."

As for those who wait to the end to complain, there is little even a great restaurateur can do. "Then we just send them dessert," he said, "and it's too late."