



HOTELS

'No way this room was sanitized': Despite assurances, hotels get mixed reviews on COVID-19 cleanliness, masks

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No one wants to find a dirty rag in their sink when checking into a hotel room. But during the coronavirus pandemic – when guests expect their rooms to be spotless and free of germs – finding a room that hasn't been fully sanitized is even more concerning.

"No way was this room sanitized, much less 'cleaned' properly," Danielle Bocage wrote in a Facebook post criticizing her recent stay at a Hilton hotel in Georgia. "I am completely disappointed at the lack of attention my room had."

"The guest brought concerns about her room to the property's attention on the second day of her stay, and we understand received a personal apology, an offer to move rooms and an offer to service the room," Hilton spokesperson Nigel Glennie told USA TODAY. "The guest declined these offers but did accept a refund for one her three nights."

Social media has featured a mix of complaints and praise for hospitality companies when it comes to COVID-19 cleanliness measures. The industry has committed to everything from mandatory masks to social distancing to intense levels of cleanliness.

"Hotels are cleaner than they've ever been before," Chip Rogers, president and CEO of the American Hotel & Lodging Association, told USA TODAY.

But it's clear individual hotels aren't necessarily holding up their end of the bargain, and Rogers conceded not every room will look pristine.

"When you're looking at millions and millions of hotel rooms, could one person find a room that they don't think is clean enough? Sure; there's no way to prevent that from happening. But the industry as a whole is cleaner than I've ever known it to be," he said.

USA TODAY saw the cleanliness measures for ourselves last month when we stayed at a Hilton, Marriott and Hyatt in Washington, D.C., and hotel guests around the country corroborated our mixed findings.

Find out more about our hotel experience: What it's like to stay at a Hilton, Marriott and Hyatt hotel during the COVID-19 pandemic

'I felt completely uncomfortable' at Hilton-brand hotel

Bocage, 50, said there appeared to be "no protocol in place" during her stay at the Home2 Suites by Hilton in Lawrenceville, Georgia, in early September.

Hilton's policy is that all guests and employees wear face coverings in indoor public areas of the hotel. And the brand's cleanliness measures include placing a sticker in between the door and wall of rooms as a seal to indicate the room has been sanitized to COVID-19 standards. Its protocol calls for disinfecting many surfaces in the room such as light switches, handles and knobs, major bathroom surfaces and the remote control.

Despite a sign at the entrance reminding guests that face masks are required, Bocage, a project manager from Richmond, Virginia, and Hilton Honors member, said more than a dozen people hung out in the lobby with no face covering, and some staff also did not wear masks.

"I felt completely uncomfortable during my entire stay since no one was wearing a face covering in the common areas," Bocage wrote on Hilton's Facebook page. Bashing hotels on social media (and other) platforms isn't new, of course, though the pandemic means guests are paying closer attention to chains' announced policies.

Meanwhile, despite the "CleanStay" label on her door, she found a dirty rag in the sink and an exploded beer bottle in the freezer, along with gunk on the freezer door handle.

She received some compensation from the hotel after reaching out and the assurance that employees were being reminded of new protocols. A customer service representative told her they "understand how jarring it is to see someone not wearing (a mask.)"

Glennie told USA TODAY that Bocage contacted the hotel before her arrival asking for extra linens for her room, but "a mix-up allowed the online selection of a room that shouldn't have been available."

"From Hilton's perspective, we believe that that the actions taken on property were appropriate and demonstrate our hospitality," Glennie said. "We add our apology to the property's and hope that we can welcome the guest to this or another Hilton property in the future."

Other guests, however, have enjoyed their stays at Hilton properties. "Since May I've stayed in a variety of hotels and had very good experiences with cleanliness. I've had multiple stays at Hyatts, Hiltons and the Walt Disney World resorts and all have been very clean," Damon Vinci, 43, a cybersecurity analyst from Frisco, Texas, told USA TODAY.

'Impeccably clean' Marriott hotel stays

Stephanie Toro, 30, stayed in several hotels during the pandemic so she could visit her ailing 101-year-old grandfather in Florida in late April. She drove from her home in Boston to Tampa over three days and stayed at Residence Inn hotels in Richmond, Virginia, and Savannah Georgia, then a Westin in Princeton, New Jersey, several weeks later. Her partner, Shane, and 1-year-old pit bull, Asher, joined. Her sister works for a Marriott-branded hotel, which makes her hotel trips affordable thanks to a discount.

"Those three hotels were nearly scarce of other guests, and the front desk associates were kind and helpful," she told USA TODAY. "Our rooms in each hotel were impeccably clean." She wishes the hotels provided cleaning wipes in the rooms, but she brought her own, so it wasn't a deal-breaker.

She saw better cleanliness measures at the independent Ocean Edge Resort and Golf Club in Brewster, Massachusetts, in July. "The room was impeccably clean, and the staff was keeping contact tracing records across the resort property and amenities," she said. "This was the only hotel that I stayed at to have done so; possibly because restaurants, pools and fitness centers were open."

Toro found her early September stay at a Residence Inn in Yonkers, New York, to have "scored the least points on cleanliness and preparedness. That is not to say it wasn't clean but was definitely managing more guest rooms than the other hotels I had visited," she said. She said she also saw one person there without a mask on.

Lori Catalan, 62, stayed at the Springhill Suites Cincinnati Midtown, a Marriott property, with her husband Sept. 5 to 6. The retired teacher of Evanston, Illinois, found employees not adhering to the company's mask policy.

"Employees at the desk at best wore masks under their noses," Catalan told USA TODAY. "Several standing farther back had them under chin, as well as did women who prepared the grab and go breakfast."

The general manager of the hotel reached out to her after she filled out a survey detailing her experience.

"Since March of this year, in addition to our weekly 'Healthy at Work' meetings and audits, we also follow all CDC and local guidelines and requirements including the temperature checks of each associate before they start their shift," Teddy Roque, regional general manager at the hotel, wrote. "I would also like to assure you that my team and I will continue to focus on doing our part in ensuring we live up to the expectations of our guests, each and every time and continue to be proactive in effort of preventing the spread of COVID-19."

Marriott spokesman John Wolf referred USA TODAY to the company's cleanliness policies page, which references required face coverings.

La Quinta 'made us feel nervous'

Steve Novick, a lawyer in Portland, Oregon, road tripped with his wife and two dogs to Albany, New York. They opted for La Quinta, on the recommendation of a friend because its hotels are dog-friendly.

Novick, 57, called the company's national reservations line to make sure COVID-19 procedures were in place and was assured that everyone had to wear masks. The chain's policies also include enhanced cleaning measures and a reminder to social distance. He made reservations at various La Quinta hotels in early August: Gillette, Wyoming; Rapid City, South Dakota; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. But when they got to Gillette, the man at the front desk wasn't wearing a mask. He told Novick there was no such policy.

"At this point we weren't going to try to find another place to take our dogs, so we sucked it up and stayed," Novick told USA TODAY. He followed up with the company's customer care service and was informed there was no national policy since every hotel is franchised.

In Rapid City and Sioux Falls, staff and guests weren't wearing masks. Wyndham's policy requiring guests and all others entering their hotels to wear face masks in the U.S. and Canada went into effect on Aug. 10 – after Novick's stays.

"We extend our sincere apologies to Mr. Novick, who stayed with us prior to that requirement taking effect, for any miscommunication of our policy," Rob Myers, a

spokesman for La Quinta parent brand Wyndham told USA TODAY. "Please know we take these concerns seriously and are addressing with the appropriate parties."

Myers added: "Prior to Aug. 10, team members at our managed hotels were required to wear appropriate PPE based on their role and where applicable by law. Franchised locations, like the ones in question, were encouraged to follow similar procedures as a best practice, however, doing so was at the discretion of each hotel's owner, unless required by law. We've since been in touch with the hotels in question and all three are in compliance with our current requirements."

Novick said the hotel stays grew unnerving: "It certainly just made us feel nervous about the whole experience to know that we were possibly being exposed in ways that we did not expect to be."

On the way back, he chose to say at Comfort Inn hotels owned by Choice and called each ahead of time instead of relying on information from chains themselves.

"I feel more comfortable staying in a Comfort Inn than in a La Quinta because at least the Comfort Inn they had masks, and when I asked people to put them on they did," he said.

Monica Fish, 40, of Glen Rock, New Jersey, enjoyed her stay over the summer at a Wyndham property in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, and said there was indeed mask wearing.

Face coverings are key to hotels' mission to keep guests safe. "If people are wearing face coverings – which our industry has created a mandate across the board that people wear face coverings in public spaces – then everybody should be fine," AHLA's Rogers told USA TODAY.

16,100 Arizona hotel jobs lost: Employees reflect on COVID-19 and possible return to work

Just in time for Halloween: New York couple breathes new life into hotel known for ghostly encounters