

DEPARTURE LOUNGE

Mini-bars given the cold shoulder



SUSAN KUROSAWA

HOTEL mini-bars could be going the way of guestroom land lines, business centres and meeting rooms. Kaput, that is, thanks to portable technology, Skype-based conferencing and, in the case of those little fridges with their overpriced cargoes, a revolt by guests at the prospect of paying alpine-high amounts for a Toblerone.

A TripAdvisor survey in the US last December revealed respondents rated the hotel mini-bar as the least-important amenity; they wanted, in order, free WiFi in guestrooms, complimentary parking, breakfast included in the room rate, a supply of "personal care items" (toiletries, to us) and free WiFi in lobbies.

Like many travellers, I have become a more canny consumer. The increase of inner-city high-rise living, especially in Australia's major cities, has heralded more all-night convenience stores. It usually means just walking a block or so to buy snacks and bottled drinks to take back to your hotel. Perhaps it's my imagination, but there seems a new roominess in mini-bar fridges, almost as if managements now expect guests to pack the space with their own supplies. Better that, perhaps, than being stuck with unwanted chocolates past their expiry dates.

The other new development is terminology. The maxi-bar has arrived. My initial suspicion was of a reference to price but it seems to be about volume and typical-

ly is offered in self-catering digs and serviced apartments with kitchen facilities. It's a lovely idea for arriving guests, especially if you pitch up late, and travel-weary. The little four-suite Drift House at Port Fairy on Victoria's south-west coast, for example, welcomes travellers with a maxi-bar and breakfast hamper that showcases local suppliers — an Irrewarra sourdough loaf from the Colac area, Kaz's Googs from Heywood, yoghurt from the Grampians, buttery shortbread from a neighbourhood baker.

So the maxi-bar, at its finest, gives guests a virtual farmgate tour and impetus to head to the cellars and providores of the immediate parish. I have had a similar experience at the stutteringly named Hotel Hotel in Canberra where mini-bar produce is locally sourced, including ACT-region wines. Ditto at 1888 Hotel in Sydney where all-Australian products are supplied and space has been left for guests to pop in their own goodies. Some properties have cafes in their foyers so guests can grab something for their rooms. Such is the case at Westin Singapore where its Daily Treats larder serves takeaway pastries, sandwiches, coffees and smoothies.

Hilton Surfers Paradise has a lobby-level Food Store with artisan breads, the makings of a pasta meal, pastries, dukkah, and even dumplings. That's what I call a maximum step in the right direction.

The maxi-bar, at its finest, gives guests a virtual farmgate tour

FOLLOW THE READER

Ecuador at a push and pull

RICHARD PEARSON
TOWNSVILLE, QUEENSLAND

OUR friends announce they are heading to Ecuador for six months. Barb says we will visit them there. Hmm, they say, as I am wheelchair-bound. Barb Googles "Galapagos Amazon disability" and up pops Juan of a company known as Ecuador for All.

So, with some trepidation, we are off to South America. After 10 days of independent exploring around provincial Ecuador and all the attendant joys of cobbled plazas, markets, galleries, volcanoes, restaurants, vicunas and hummingbirds, we meet up with Juan in Quito.

We set off in his 4WD across the majestic Andes. Juan's a great guide and master of his special rickshaw-sedan-wheelchair. I'm dragged, pushed and carried to heights and depths I couldn't imagine. We stay in a rustic jungle lodge. We go whitewater rafting, explore the forest and quaint old towns, meet the indigenous people and sample their food. We cross a stupendous gorge by "cable cart" and watch turkey vultures wheeling overhead.

Then it's back over the mountains to Quito, to

rearrange our bags and catch a flight to the Galapagos. The view from the small plane as we approach Isabella airport is straight out of a David Attenborough doco. We are met by Galakiwi Tours and Jairo, a National Parks guide, who provides similar wheelchair transport, so it's up hills, across beaches and into our own launch to snorkel with sharks and meet sea lions, boobies, terns and iguanas. Then a morning's kayaking among penguins and turtles, and another searching lagoons for flamingos, white-cheeked pintail ducks and more iguanas.

Lunch intervenes (three courses are obligatory) before we head out to explore lava flows, see giant tortoises or climb up a volcano to appreciate the gradient of native flora, everywhere accompanied by Darwin's finches, and all providing an amazing reminder of the famous naturalist's great insight. Jairo's knowledge is extensive and his enjoyment matches ours. The environment is stunning.

Two weeks of new experiences, people, animals and plants, and accessibility to the wilds. After a lifetime as a zoologist, now somewhat confined, I would never have thought it possible. Thanks to Barb the Googler, Juan, Jairo and all the wonderful people along the way, it has been an unlikely challenge unforgettably achieved.

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RANT OR RAVE

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OPEN BOOK

'I PASSED the time on the long flight reading a history of Australian politics in the twentieth century, wherein I encountered the startling fact that in 1967 the prime minister, Harold Holt, was strolling along a beach in Victoria when he plunged into the surf and vanished. No trace of the poor man was ever seen again. This seemed doubly astounding to me — first that Australia could just lose a prime minister (I mean, come on) and second that news of this had never reached me.'

BILL BRYSON IN A SUNBURNED COUNTRY (2000)

WHAT IN THE WORLD

HAWAIIAN Airlines has just clocked up its 10th anniversary of flights into Australia; good news for Queenslanders is that the carrier has announced an upgrade to Airbus A330-200 aircraft on its Brisbane-Honolulu services from December 5, with more legroom for passengers and on-demand seat-back entertainment • Unicef Australia and Qantas have launched a High Five campaign encouraging passengers to dig for loose change and donate as little as 5c to improve the life of an underprivileged child; the initiative is an extension of the Change for Good partnership • From June 27 to August 31, visitors to Hong Kong can expect shopping and dining deals during the annual Summer Fun Festival; organised by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, the event is set to cover key attractions and outlets, and will be preceded by the Hong Kong International Dragon Boat Races on June 6-8.

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