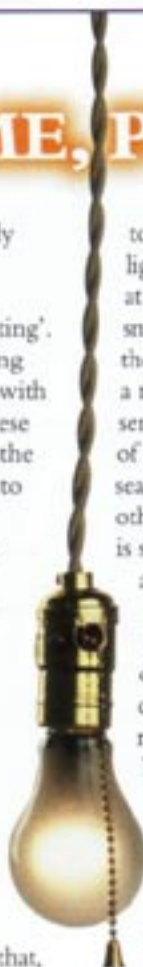


ILLUMINATE ME, PLEASE!

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What makes a good business hotel? It depends on exactly what sort of business you conduct, but for me it is not a trendy, pint-size boutique hotel with subdued lighting.

No longer will I stay in any hotel that offers 'mood lighting'. After a long and exhausting day of business there is nothing more irritating than trying to calculate screeds of figures, with sore tired eyes, under an anorexic light globe. Why do these hotels bother to put in a desk, since it is unusable during the hours of darkness? Some minimalist hotels simply refuse to clutter the desk with anything as convenient as a lamp. Those that do choose a lampshade so dark and opaque it effectively blocks out any light given off by the bulb. Instead of sitting comfortably at a desk, you are forced to perch precariously on the edge of the bed, juggling calculator, pencil and papers on your lap, trying to work by the pathetic glow of a phallic bedside lamp. Mood lighting is certainly an appropriate description. It succeeds in putting me in a foul mood every time.

I once stayed in a hotel that offered 'old world charm'. The room was large, almost cavernous, reminiscent of a medieval chamber. Even during daylight it was dark, with heavy wood panelled floor and wainscoting. But, despite the room's size, there was not a single overhead light. All lighting, if you can be generous enough to call it that, was provided by candle-like fixtures set high up on the walls. It was impossible to work at night. Even the solar-powered calculator refused to flicker into life, despite my standing on the bed, arm outstretched, thrusting it next to the lamp.

Lack of lighting in the room often sends you in search of somewhere else to do paperwork, especially if it involves collaboration with fellow company members. In some modern hotels the 'meeting room' is extinct. To compound the problem, these hotels usually have only one sofa in reception, the kind specifically designed with a sleek silhouette that effectively precludes anyone from sitting comfortably, let alone conducting a meeting. Not that a tiny reception hall is the place to be conducting private company business, anyway.

The absence of a meeting room can find my colleagues and me in the hotel bar huddled around a table just large enough

to place a drink on, after dragging it under the only downlight in the room. Frustration is magnified by having to peer at associates through a thickening haze of acrid cigarette smoke and straining to hear over the budding jazz band in the corner. This type of bar is perfect as a secluded place for a romantic or clandestine meeting, but far from ideal for a sensitive discussion on the commitment of substantial amounts of company funds, particularly when competitors walk in and seat themselves nearby. That's a problem with trendy hotels - others from back home want to stay there too. At least there is solace in the fact they are having to work under the same appalling conditions.

This intrusion of local competition at 'your' hotel means that confidential appointments must be conducted somewhere other than the public domain of the bar, which doubles as the cafe during the day. In the absence of anything remotely resembling a conference room, you are forced to conduct business appointments in your room. You hope the clients are used to this scenario, and don't mistake the situation as an invitation for business of a more frivolous nature.

Appointments in your room have some serious drawbacks. You have to ensure that it is tidy and remember to relocate the dripping underwear draped around the bathroom. It can be extremely distracting trying to negotiate a sensitive contract with a pair of dirty knickers protruding from under the bed. During a long meeting your client may request to use the bathroom. While you are forced to hear their toilet habits because of less than adequately soundproofed walls, you cringe at the realisation you shaved your legs this morning and left the used razor on the edge of the bath.

At the conclusion of the appointment your client may suggest going out for coffee or a meal. This unfortunately involves opening the wardrobe to get your jacket, only to have the clutter you shoved in there seconds before the appointment tumble onto the floor at your feet.

Now when booking my business trips, I insist on a hotel with conference facilities and travel with 100 watt bulbs to temporarily replace those objects moonlighting as light globes. **AM**