

# 'The service is immaculate, nothing bad can happen and the internet thingy works'



We all expect perfection now – so which hotels deliver it? Victoria Mather has the answer

**T**ime is so much more valuable than money nowadays. We live in the age of the C10 aeroplane ticket, so travel is not a luxury, it's an expectation. The question is not "how to...?" but "where to?" For the cash-rich, time-

poor, the only real concern is how to avoid an expensive mistake. Mr Goldman Sachs does not wish to be marooned on an island in the Maldives that was advertised as idyllic and find that Mrs GS is incoherent with rage because the spa is all wind chimes and no ayurvedic massage and the barman is incapable of making a decent vodka martini.

The marvellous thing is that we've all become terribly spoilt. This means that sloppy standards are no longer tolerated by travel sophisticates. The room service that takes aeons to arrive and the swimming pool verdant with algae aren't charming aberrations of the foreign – they're rubbish. If we wanted pool problems we could have stayed at our Old Rectory in Gloucestershire. The standard of all our houses has rocketed; there's no point travelling to be less comfortable than one is at home.

The imperative of guaranteed satisfaction has thus transformed luxury travel. No time, no patience, but no problem with money.

The success of Amanesorts in the early 1990s showed for the first time that if you deliver perfection the customers are not going to quibble over price. The Indonesian publisher Adrian Zecha and his architect Ed Tuttle built the hotel they wanted to stay in, at Amanpuri, Phuket. Aman, with its exquisite design and lobbies reached by stepping stones over lily ponds, espoused Zen-chic and translated hotels into lifestyle statements.

Charles Saatchi, the Duchess of York, Mick Jagger and David Tang all became Amanjunkies. More Amans opened in Bali,



Java, Morocco and Wyoming. The magic lives on: Tang has just had his 50th birthday party at the new Aman in Bhutan.

The GS factor, both Guaranteed Satisfaction and Goldman Sachs et al with their whacking bonuses and stressed-out lives, made possible the Four Seasons boom. The best hotel group in the world, in my view, it aims to satisfy people who cannot tolerate disappointment. And it does it very well. Which is why there are now Four Seasons resorts from Costa Rica to Provence (see page 35), and Four Seasons boutique hotels in Milan, Cairo, Prague and, most recently, Budapest. Our banker might not know Prague from pastry, but he knows he's in a Four Seasons. He's tried and tested them on business trips in cities around the world. The service is immaculate, nothing bad can happen to you and the Internet thingy works.

Mr GS, with his travel-without-tears attitude, is right. Like Bollinger or Verve-Cloquet, the Four Seasons is a marque that inspires confidence. It enhances the glamour of travelling to a city for the weekend. The culture, the museums, the restaurants would be horribly diminished if one had to stay in a hotel. Holidays should be ultra-quality time – especially if they are short ones.

The most dramatic example of this is how a visit to Moscow has been transformed by the new Ararat Park Hyatt. I have been going to Moscow since 1987, staying in degrees of discomfort from ghostly to intolerable. Now I stay in the city's coolest bar.

To have a room on the 10th floor of the Ararat is to live on the edge of the new Russia: the lift opens on to the glass-roofed bar at the top of the whizz-bang modern atrium. Before you turn right down a brushed corridor to the bedrooms, you see smiling staff (the smiling a near miracle achieved by Hyatt training), men whose wrists glitter with

£50,000 watches lifting glasses of red-rich Pomerol, and beautiful girls drinking Cristal.

Wise up to the Park Hyatt, the group's boutique hotels. I'll let you in on a secret: if you've never been to Sydney before, you must, regardless of expense, spend your first night in the Park Hyatt tucked under the Harbour Bridge. The Opera House is virtually on your balcony across the glossy waters.

There is, of course, the "little gem" factor. How droll to stay in the Palazzo Ruspoli in Rome, a private apartment near the Spanish Steps; how too, too modern to be in JK Place in Florence, a contemporary townhouse thick with scented candles; how sophisticated to help yourself to drinks in Dotis Marta Medina's Casa de Madrid, an 18th-century delight opposite the Opera House.

The trouble is that one man's gem is another man's paste bauble. The generation that adored Ian Schrager's designer hotels – the Mondrian, the Royalton, the Delano – would consider it slick to stay at Ca' Pisani, Venice's boutique contemporary hotel. That absolutely would not do for Mr Goldman Sachs, who would gravitate to the Cipriani, owned by Orient-Express, another marque.

And, by the way, the Schrager generation have grown up, married, got children. They no longer want to bounce off white walls. They want comfort; they want real doormen, not resting actors dressed in Donna Karan. They want concierges capable of getting good tables at the best restaurants. Don't we all?

The secret is to know what you like and to realise that the short break can be the big fix. On a long weekend in Botswana, I stayed at Gametrackers, the Orient-Express camps, in seven different ecosystems. Each tent layout was similar, so I could always find the loo at night. The shorter the trip, the less time for anything to go wrong; hence time travel has been redefined for the benefit of us all.