

# Free for all

Okay, so you expect a hotel to give you coffee. But what about a car and driver? Ask, Dave McGinn writes, and you may be surprised at what you can get for free

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**DAVE MCGINN**

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An economic downturn is always a good time to look for hotel deals. This winter, hotels everywhere are dropping rates to meet guests' shrinking budgets, even in hot destinations such as New York.

But why settle for a discount when you can also get good stuff free? Travellers are accustomed to certain free amenities, such as newspapers and coffee, from hotels. But hoteliers will go much further to make your stay more comfortable or save you money - especially in these troubled times, when they have to work harder to compete for your loyalty. That means perks from chicken noodle soup if you're sick to (literally) a free ride.

Hotels know that small complimentary services make a big impact on where travellers decide to stay, says Geoffrey Argue, president of Les Clefs D'Or Canada, the country's hotel concierge society. "People are much more conscious of complimentary services than they used to be," he says. So most hotels advertise a selection of unusual perks, often on their websites. Still, Argue says, it's simple to learn about them once you've arrived. "All you have to do is ask," he says.

In some cases, you will discover little bonus services that are overlooked by most of your fellow guests. For instance, while many hotels offer guests free gym access, Four Seasons provides guests with exercise clothing, so they can decide to dash down to the gym even if they forgot to pack their sweats. And if you're hurrying off to a meeting, some hotels (including the sharp with a complimentary shoe shine.



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(CLAYTON HANMER FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)



Of course, getting to a meeting can be a hassle: For business travellers, the expense of taxicabs or car rentals adds up. But what about a free car and driver? This year, W Hotels introduced a fleet of new Acuras to whisk you around from its U.S. locations. In Miami, the newly opened five-star Regent Bal Harbour has a Mercedes sedan at your service.

But such service isn't available only at flashy properties. Fairmont hotels in the U.S. have launched a complimentary service offering local transportation for members of Fairmont's guest loyalty program in Lexus hybrids; in Vancouver, Sutton Place and L'Hermitage offer all guests complimentary rides, and the Park Hyatt Toronto has a comfortable Audi A8 at your service. (However, don't expect to be driven to the ends of the Earth. That Audi, for instance, will take guests only within five kilometres of the hotel.)

For those who get their motors running and head out on the highway, a stay at Best Western might be in order. Nearly 1,500 of its North American hotels are "rider friendly," meaning they offer free wipe-down towels and buckets to motorcycling guests. "Bikers have very specific needs when they arrive at hotels," says Troy Rutman, the chain's director of external communications. After a long ride, they typically want bottled water, lip balm and sunscreen. And they seem to know about the chain's offerings: 22,000 guests are enrolled in its Ride Rewards loyalty program, promoted through Harley-Davidson.

If you like the idea of tooling around on two wheels but are more into pedal power, Fairmont hotels in Canada will offer guests complimentary access to bicycles beginning this spring.



While many large resorts offer complimentary bicycles, Fairmont is upping the luxury factor with BMW Cruise bikes. It's not just a bike; it's a Beemer.

That sort of attention to detail is part of classic hotel service, and sometimes hotels will make friendly gestures a matter of policy. Feeling under the weather? If you're staying at one of several Fairmonts - in San Jose, the Fairmont Orchid in Hawaii and the Fairmont Empress in Victoria - you can have free chicken noodle soup delivered to your room. Guests "absolutely love it," Dillon Carfoot, the concierge at the Fairmont Empress, says of the service. "The worst thing is when you're on the road and feeling sick, so to get that little bit of extra pampering, they definitely appreciate it."

And if chicken soup won't solve the problem, a concierge will typically pick up medicine.

That is, if you ask them to. When it comes to concierge services, guests can feel free to demand just about anything - and yet many don't, says Juliana Shallcross, a senior editor at Hotelchatter.com. "People are reluctant," she says, "because they think there could be a cost associated with it."

Carfoot says that for his staff no request is too small. A guest with her grandchildren in tow once asked him to find a VHS copy of *Around the World in 80 Days*. And she wanted the original, not the remake. "I went in to town and rummaged through bargain buckets at all these video stores and actually found it," he says. "We're forever rushing into town to get things for guests."

More straightforward benefits, such as free meals and upgrades, have usually been the province of frequent guests. These days, however, hotels are willing to work harder to earn everybody's loyalty. "I definitely think you will see more packages that will include more incentives" such as free parking and free breakfast, Argue says - especially at luxury hotels. "If people are going to pay a higher price... they will definitely look at all the amenities the hotel will offer to make them justify what they're paying."

Indeed, hotels around the world have been doing just that, Shallcross says. "A lot of hotels are worried about keeping up their business, and you definitely see a lot more complimentary services," she says. "You see complimentary valet parking, gift cards to the spa, free breakfast, or a third night free sometimes."

Certain tricks will help you get access to such benefits. When it comes to bargaining for deals or freebies, you should always sign up for a hotel's loyalty program, says Rick Doble, who runs the website Savvy-discounts.com. "It gives you a bargaining chip," he says. "It allows you to say, 'Hey, I'm a loyal customer. Why don't you do X, Y or Z?' " Doble has used that bargaining chip to get free breakfasts, free drinks at hotel bars and, in many cases, upgrades to bigger and better rooms.

Most importantly, Doble says, remember that most people are afraid to haggle - and you shouldn't be.

"Everything," he says, "is negotiable."

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