

Accidental Tourist



RICHARD ASHER

DON'T know about you, but I dislike people poking around my bedroom. This is why I don't have a maid or butler at home. I like finding things where I left them. Ever since I was able to say goodbye to Mom "tidying" my room, I have thrived on that particular pleasure of the adult world. Particularly when I'm on holiday.

No such luck in the hotels of Europe, of course.

There, you not only have a stranger come in and turn her nose up at your filthy socks, but you get to pay for the privilege. You find items moved to the other side of the room. The sheet, yesterday tucked so tight under the mattress you had to chisel it open, is vacuum-sealed into place once again. Your three €10 notes are still there. Or was it four?

You have new towels, new linen. A new bar of soap, wrapped in plastic. New plastic cups, also wrapped in plastic. You get to wreak a shameful toll on the environment throughout your hotel stay, then, but don't worry — it's all included in the bill. Thanks, guys.

European housekeeping staff cannot take no for an answer. In my experience the "Do Not Disturb" sign is simply there to be ignored. And it doesn't help to ask them in person, as I kept trying to do at my supposedly "no frills" hotel in France a few weeks ago.

They'd answer my hopeful smile with a look that could kill small rodents. They'd grunt something along the lines of *oui*, then launch a siege campaign in the hallway. The moment we went out, they'd commence Operation Barge In. Which was invariably a success.

It's not just in cheap hotels that the chambermaids insist on nosing about. A few days later we moved on to über-chic boutique accommodation in Paris. With its romantic view of the Eiffel Tower, it wasn't

Anytime after sunrise, you risk being attacked with a mop



Illustration: PIET GROBLER

Euro brooms sweep mean

Determined cleaning staff will barge into your hotel room, like it or not

the sort of room in which you'd want strange people going through your things. Here, reception even spoke English, and they put my mind at ease when I requested no cleaning visits. "Certainly, sir, we'll make a note," they cooed. But the next evening we returned to a shimmering room and were unable to find anything.

The bit that I don't get is this: why would you ignore a legitimate chance to skip some work? If I were in a housekeeping trade — physical stuff that doesn't pay well — I'd be thrilled to find an instruction to give Room 413 a miss. I'd use the time to rest my weary legs or have a smoke. Maybe even knock off early.

Au contraire, they seem to take it personally when you say you don't want them busting in. It's as if your room is one of their

children. They hate you for taking it away from them, for stealing their purpose in life. There must be an emotional element to it that I can't grasp.

Unpleasant though it is to have your room ransacked while you're out, staying in is worse. Any time after sunrise, you run the risk of having the door thrown open and being attacked in bed with a mop. So you have to sleep with one eye open. Not really the point of a holiday.

If I had my way, room cleaning would be an optional extra in all hotels, only to be performed upon request. But to bring in that policy, you'd have to get past a formidable army of disgruntled chambermaids. Together, they could form a pretty mean trade union. Armed with sharp toilet brushes and powerful detergents, they could be quite a fighting force. An uprising against the phasing-out of their industry wouldn't bear thinking about.

A general strike, on the other hand, would get my vote. — © Asher is a freelance writer

My Kind of Holiday

Where did you spend your last holiday?

Where I am right now, at Haga Haga on the Eastern Cape coast.

What was the best thing you did while there?

Fishing and braaing mussels taken off the rocks and taking our Scottie dogs for walks on deserted beaches.

Your favourite city abroad, and why?

Austin, Texas. Great music, attractive city, university-town atmosphere, ballet, theatre, a little of everything, and wonderful people.

What must a first-time visitor see there?

The music festivals featuring artists such as Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton.

What was your best holiday, ever?

A tie between chartering a yacht years ago and sailing in the Caribbean with my family, and recently visiting the historic sites of Ethiopia.

What was your worst holiday ever? What happened?

When I was in London many years ago, three of us were set to tour Europe for three months in a van. But the night before we left, we lent the van to one of the three, who crashed it.

Where did you go on holiday when you were little?

Transkei Wild Coast. My grandparents owned the hotel at Umtata Mouth.

Your favourite SA destination, and why?

The Transkei Wild Coast. I grew up there. I was married there. It is my spiritual home.

Your favourite restaurant, anywhere?

In South Africa, I have to choose two: Wombles in Parktown North and Reubens in Franschhoek.

What is the most exotic dish you have eaten on your travels?

"Fish-eye swimming" is a soup for breakfast — after a night sampling saké on an island off Japan.

One place to see before you die?

Vietnam. People rave about it. It is still unspoilt, relatively cheap and the people are fantastic.

Have you had any embarrassing moments as a traveller?

Yes. I had my briefcase stolen in Paris. I had to go to the embassy to apply for a new passport. The consul made me speak Afrikaans to establish whether or not I really was South African. Half the way through, she said: "You are South African all right. Nobody would speak Afrikaans so badly if they were pretending."

What do you avoid on holiday?

Crowds. I like the peace of out-of-the-way places.

One travel destination you would call "never again"?

I still have to go there!

■ Robin Binckes is a tour guide and author of the Voortrekker bodice-ripper "Canvas Under The Sky"

EDITOR: Andrew Unsworth DEPUTY EDITOR: Paul Ash CONTACT: Tel: 011 280 5121. e-mail: travelmag@sundaytimes.co.za
 DESIGNER: Vernice Shaw SUBEDITORS: Elizabeth Sleith and Anton Ferreira PICTURE SOURCING: Aubrey Paton
 COVER: A young boy jumps in the clear waters of Lindos Bay, Rhodes Island PICTURE: © Gallo/Getty Images COVER DESIGN: Fiona Krusch
 ADVERTISING: Ian Shiffman, Business Manager. Tel 021 488 1924. Cell: 082 718 8714. e-mail: shiffmani@sundaytimes.co.za and Debbie Thompson, CSO Hospitality, Travel and Leisure: Tel 011 280 3555. Cell 082 900 9965. e-mail thompsond@avusa.co.za. SUBSCRIBER HOTLINE: 0860 52 52 00

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