

# Basic board

*Jonathan Reed goes looking for somewhere to hang his coat among the new breed of concept hotels*

“I’m a millennial, but I’m also an introvert,” writes travel blogger Ben Schlappig. “Hotel executives are building everything around millennials right now and they expect them all to want to work in these hip, communal lobby spaces - or in bed. That doesn’t work for me.”

It is a view shared by this disgruntled UK buyer: “At IMEX Frankfurt my hotel room didn’t have anything: no wardrobe, just two coat hangers on a rail, and barely a desk, more a shelf.” He’ll probably want to avoid Marriott’s new brand Moxy, which has no wardrobes either, reflecting research that suggests many guests don’t even bother to unpack their suitcases.

The approach has many advocates. “Twenty years ago you had to wear a suit to every client meeting,” says Kai Schomann, of Hotel Republic. “Now you’d look ridiculous. It’s so much more casual. In the summer a lot of our agency clients are wearing flip flops and shorts in meetings.”

Yet while many business travellers may be dressing down, not every sector can get away with Steve Jobs-style polo shirts. Samme Allen, of The Sequoia Partnership, is a regular speaker at global industry events. “I try to pack light but take gym clothes as well as business attire and often need to change for evening dinners and receptions. Yes, I need wardrobe space, but an ironing board is also a must. Hotels only offering one or two for 500 business guests is extremely frustrating.”

She adds: “Hotels should also review their laundry charges as these are prohibitive. I’m a small business and can’t pass those costs on to my clients. And there’s a knock-on effect as I’m often struggling to keep on top of laundry at home before heading off to the next destination.”

Another factor is ‘shrinkflation’, which has affected more than just your favourite chocolate bar. Bedrooms in

the larger chains have shrunk from an average 35 sqm to 23 sqm while new brands are closer to 19 sqm. That, in turn, requires more creative solutions. The new Vib chain, currently only in North America but with ambitious expansion plans, offers platform beds so suitcases can be stowed underneath and desks double as drawers.

Multi-functional desks - often movable tables paired with desk-height swivel chairs that a guest might use as a dining table - have also become standard at many flagship Marriotts, the chain that initially bore the brunt of customer complaints about the removal of desks.

“When I’m tired and thirsty, I don’t want to have to leave my room to get water because there’s no minibar”

Looking at the offering of Vib, it’s not hard to see their target audience. Guests are invited to “catch your breath after a busy day in our Zen Zone” and “grab a bite at the Grab and Go stations”, while “gaming pods will let you escape with friends and colleagues while you enjoy its tech-centric design and features”.

Over 30? Go elsewhere.

But it may be unfair to lay all the blame on

millennials. Michael Suomi, of Stonehill & Taylor, an architectural firm that works with leading hotel brands, claims these new trends are aimed at keeping pace with the changing needs of all business travellers. Trips are shorter due to online meetings tools, and most guests arrive bristling with technology. And with the pace of change showing no sign of abating, rooms are being redesigned at a record pace.

Meanwhile, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts has created Excom-Y, a team of 10 talented millennials, six from the company plus four young business leaders, who will mirror the group’s executive committee.

“As we embark on an unprecedented growth phase, it’s paramount we seek input and insights from our colleagues, particularly our young talent, who possess an intimate understanding of Generation Y trends,” explains Craig Cochrane, the company’s senior VP for HR.

“They blend business trips into personal vacations and rely on online sources for information about their hotels or destinations.” Clearly the strategy is paying off: millennials now account for more than 30 per cent of guests.

Stephani Robson, of the Hotel School at Cornell University, warns: “We’re going to see more tensions in the next few years, as hotels try to capture smaller and smaller slices of the market.” That will mean experimentation, which may alienate some people. “When I’m tired and thirsty, I don’t want to have to leave my room to get water because there’s no minibar. But minibars are becoming extinct, they require space and labour.”

It’s an understandable trend and reflects changing patterns of human behaviour. But it isn’t always welcome.

Whether you prefer a shower or relaxing bath, spare a thought for the beleaguered hotel marketer. There are now more than 500 hotel brands vying for your business, and finding an offering that fits the need of every guest is impossible.

Expect the competition to become more intense. ■