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The devil is in the detail with any hotel stay

Little things can make a big impression, starting with the '10 and five' rule

The '10 and five' rule in hospitality says that staff coming within 10 feet of a guest should smile and make eye contact, while those coming within five feet should add a warm verbal greeting. I'll add a 10 'rule' of my own. When you arrive into a hotel, I think it should take no more than 10 seconds for a staff member to make eye contact. I had a gorgeous example of that in The Bristol last week. When we arrived, receptionists were busy with other guests. But one caught my eye, and smiled. It set a tone. It made me feel good.

It also got me thinking about attention to detail in hotels. These are places where micro problems can escalate into stinking TripAdvisor reviews, or unexpected touches can surprise and delight stressed guests. Little things can say so much about culture, quality and cleanliness.

Touring the Amber Springs Hotel in Co Wexford with its manager recently, I watched as he stooped to pick up a small piece of litter. He did it on autopilot, drawing no attention to the action. But it told me — and the guests and staff around us — that he cared and led by example.

Other small touches with a big impact? A server who remembered my coffee order the next morning. A four-star that invested in Dyson hairdryers for all rooms. Self-catering stays with an in-tune acoustic guitar, or sliced lemon in the freezer to add to G&Ts at its honesty bar.

One theme of Dromoland Castle's recent refurb has been "fine-tuning the detail", manager Mark Nolan told me. "You can't get away with just being average any more."

Its Castle Spa, for example, has pressed flowers from the

estate outside treatment rooms, adult colouring books in the relaxation area, reading glasses next to forms that need filling in and wooden cordless phone chargers and jewellery purses alongside the robes in its lockers. Those touches make you go 'ooh', but they also tell a story about a resort that understands its guests, anticipates their needs, and links its luxury to a natural setting.

Detail isn't solely the domain of five-stars. Think of the difference a charging socket by your bunk makes to a hostel stay. Or a home-baked scone at your B&B. You don't expect layers of luxury on a budget stay, but expectations can be met, and exceeded, at every price point.

They can also be dashed. Mouldy swimming-pool tiles are a bugbear of mine, as are by-the-numbers buffet breakfasts that make no effort to use or label local foods (hello 'sausages' and 'beans'). Single-use toiletries send a message about sustainability; dirty uniforms or floors speak to management and hygiene. And what does it say when a wrong item appears on a bill, or a dish described as gluten-free or coeliac-friendly turns out not to be?

Clearly, not all details can delight. Many just need to tick over, meeting expectations rather than exceeding them. Hospitality is also human. Mistakes happen. It's rare that a stay should be judged on a single shortfall, and any good hotel or restaurant critic knows that the handling of a mistake tells you far more than the mistake itself.

But details that disappoint, or delight, add up to give a disproportionately strong impression of a stay. It can take less than 10 seconds, or feet, to make the difference.