

HOTEL AMENITIES

The world of mini-bars

The mini-bar has come a long way since the 1970s

By Alfred Borcover

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In the realm of hotel stays, perhaps the least important item in the room, from my perspective, is the mini-bar. But for many travelers, the mini-bar is a lifesaver, providing instant access to a snack or beverage any time of day or night—at a price, of course.

Have a yen for peanuts, pretzels, a beer, spirits, a cola? No need to leave your room. Just key into the mini-bar, a hotel room feature that's been around since the 1970s.

Nevertheless, there are some relatively new wrinkles. Wyndham International, for example, lowered its mini-bar prices for nonalcoholic beverages and snacks, but not for alcoholic drinks. "Guests were saying they were tired of being nicked and dimed at hotels, so we decided to do something about it," said Andrew Jordan, the chain's executive vice president of sales and marketing. Members of the Wyndham ByRequest program (open to all guests) can select complimentary beverages and snacks for their room by filling out a personal profile, he said.

The No. 1 reason hotel guests like mini-bars is convenience, said Paul Daly, executive director of food and beverage for Chicago-based Hyatt Hotels Corp. Yes, the pricing for mini-bar items is high, he acknowledged, but guests are willing to pay for the convenience.

Mini-bars have come a long way since the '70s. You can still find peanuts, chips and cookies as well as the usual beverages. But a few hotel minds who think outside the traditional box have added some untraditional items to the mix: condoms, gels, lubricants, massage oils and canned oxygen, to name a few. To borrow from Dave Barry, "I'm not making this up."

Not only has mini-bar content changed, the mini-bar itself has changed. "When mini-bars first were introduced, the majority operated on the honor system," Daly said. "Whatever you took you reported when you checked out. Or there was a mini-bar attendant who would check the bar every day and record what items were used."

New technology in the last five years or so has changed the mini-bar world, Daly said, explaining that infrared scanners or motion sensors in mini-bars (linked to hotel computers) now provide real-time charging. "You pick an item out of a mini-bar—scanner parameters average 12 seconds—so you can look at the item and put it back. If you don't put it back you are charged in real time. If you were to go to the front desk, the charge would be on your bill. That has helped hotels run the operation more profitably. More importantly, it's a lot more convenient and accurate for our guests."

Daly said not all Hyatt hotels have mini-bars. "If the bars weren't put in when the hotel was built, it's a sizable capital investment to put them in afterwards." Those that do have mini-bars are stocked very similarly because the demands are pretty typical—beer, soda, water,

pretzels, chocolate chip cookies, candy bars.

"Pricing is dependent upon the market," said Daly. "We typically price items consistent with the way we price room service items. Room service or mini-bar charges will be slightly more expensive than going down to a hotel restaurant or hotel outlet because the mini-bar and room service operations are more labor intensive."

In Hyatt's upscale hotels, such as the Hotel Victor in Miami's hot South Beach strip, "we try to be unique and try to meet the needs of what we think those guests want."

Items on the Victor's mini-bar list range from \$4 for Dr. Pepper, tonic water and Evian to \$75 for a bottle of Patron Silver Tequila. A bottle of cabernet sauvignon goes for \$40. There's also an item called the Kinky Khemist, a kit that includes condoms for a sexy interlude for \$20.

In the same Miami neighborhood, the Clinton Hotel & Spa mini-bar stocks a Kama Sutra Lover's Paintbox for \$45, which includes jars of milk chocolate, white chocolate and dark chocolate, and a soft paintbrush.

Here's a random sampling of other traditional and untraditional items offered in various mini-bars here and abroad:

Sofitel New York. Candy (Kit Kat, M&M's, Snickers, Toblerone) sells for \$3.50; honey-roasted cashews, \$7.50; Coca-Cola, \$5.50; Perrier and orange juice, \$5.75; and Grey Goose Vodka, \$8.75.

Hyatt Regency Chicago. Spirits such as Jack Daniel's Bourbon and Dewar's Scotch are \$7.50; domestic beer, \$5; chardonnay, \$9; soft drinks, \$3.25; juices, \$4; snacks, \$3-\$9.

Bernardus Lodge and Quail Lodge in Carmel Valley, Calif. Complimentary mini-bar is stocked with a bottle of Marinus wine, artichoke salsa, Bernardus Sesame Tortilla Chips, Earthbound Farms Organic Cookies, Mighty Leaf Jade Green and Earl Grey tea, and Bernardus Blend coffee.

Amara Creekside Resort. Sedona, Ariz. Offerings include fruit juices and iced tea for \$3.50; Starbucks Frappuccino, \$5; Nature Valley Granola Bar, \$3; pistachios, chocolate-covered blueberries, raisins, spiced pecans, \$8; aromatherapy candles, \$12.

Wyndham Hotels. Under its price-cutting move, mini-bar items that formerly cost between \$2 and \$3 were reduced—Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, \$1.50; Snickers Bar, M&M's, \$1.25; and Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Bar, \$2.50.

Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel, Calif. Soft drinks, \$3.25; dry snacks, from candy bars at \$2 to a chocolate-and-nut tray for \$12; Ritz Champagne, \$30. Ritz-Carlton's bestsellers across the U.S.: bottled water, Diet Coke, Coca-Cola, M&M's and Pringles.

Four Seasons San Francisco. In addition to its regular mini-bars, the luxe hotel is introducing a kids' mini-bar, which includes Oreos, animal crackers, juice boxes and milk chugs for \$1 to \$3.50.

Esencia Resort, Riviera Blanca, Mexico. No mini-bar, but a small Sub-Zero refrigerator stocked daily with complimentary water, soft drinks, juice and beer.

Meurice, Paris. Soft drinks, about \$7.40; half bottle of champagne, \$43.35; cocktail nuts and fruit juices, \$8.60.

The Grove, a 300-acre getaway estate in Hertfordshire near London. The Brit's Kinky Khemist Passion Pleaser (condoms, etc.), \$9; colas, \$4; beer, \$6.35; Belgravia Luxury Biscuits, \$12.70.

Oh, and if you're out of breath, the newest mini-bar item is Oxia, a shaving-cream-size can that can dispense about 12 uses of 90 percent pure oxygen for \$14.95. Developed by the Oxia Group of Las Vegas, the wellness item is available at Opus, a boutique hotel in Vancouver; Westin Hotel in Whistler, British Columbia; Le Germain, a boutique hotel in Toronto; and W Hotels in Montreal, New York (and soon throughout the U.S.).