

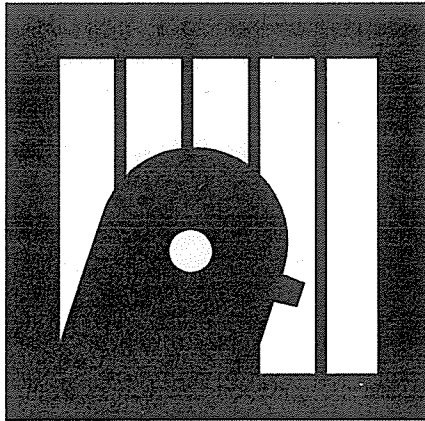
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MY FIRST TRIP TO A THEMED HOTEL

BY JAMES KEOWN

Please excuse my post if it fails to follow the norms of this hotel and travel site. This is my first time writing a review. The “Tips for Posting” section says that I should “talk about why I chose my hotel” and “provide specific examples from my trip that highlight my rating.”

I cannot remember specifically why I wanted to stay in a themed hotel – or even if I ever really wanted to go on vacation at all. The lead up time before my trip was a bit of a blur. I was working 60-plus hours a week at my job, spending evenings with my friends, and nurturing a new relationship one moment, and then in the next moment, I was squeezed into the middle seat of an airplane, leaving my work, friends, and new girlfriend behind. Like I said, it was a bit of a blur.

I do remember clearly that a friend had pointed out to me the year before how the hot trend in travel was “experiential” or “themed” hotels. These lodgings featured once ordinary public spaces that had been converted into bourgeois retreats. Closed churches, shuttered psychiatric hospitals, and former jails were being repurposed into niche hotels and luxury resorts. Some of these themed get-a-ways promoted the

restorative power of their seclusion, while others advertised haunted rooms and grisly pub crawls.

It’s hard for me to say if I selected my destination or if my destination selected me. It feels much more like the latter. One minute, there I was, sitting at a desk in my office; the next, I was standing in front of the imposing steel doors leading into my first themed hotel experience.

The staff member who greeted me upon my arrival promised an all-inclusive experience where I would not need to spend a dime of my own money – not even for tips. He declared that I did not need my wallet at this hotel, and he then promptly took it from me. He actually took my wallet and told me that I could have it back at the end of my stay.

Another staff member toured me around the hotel’s sprawling facility. He could tell I was a little nervous. After all, this was my first time staying at a themed hotel. To help reassure me, he showed me the hotel’s medical facilities, which had been carefully designed to resemble a run-down Victorian-era surgery. He also took me to see the hotel’s collection of, so-called,

“Quiet Rooms,” which had been skillfully decorated to create the feel of an actual Soviet gulag.

During my tour, I took note of the richly depressing color scheme. I imagined that somewhere in the hundreds of color swatches from Home Depot that I had reviewed to paint my living room just before my vacation must have been one called “Hopeless Yellow.” Everything in the hotel was painted “Hopeless Yellow” and “Battleship Gray.” It was a brilliant touch that really added to the feel of the place.

My room was sparse. Well, that’s not quite accurate. The apartments in East Germany after World War II were sparse. My room was not quite that fancy. Imagine a room the size of a parking space at Wal-Mart. The walls, of course, were painted “Hopeless Yellow” with “Battleship Gray” trim. The room had only two pieces of furniture: a metal desk with an attached metal bench and a metal bed/under-storage combo. Each furniture piece possessed the cold reality of the classic style of Brutalism design. I thought, maybe, I had seen something similar in an IKEA store two years before. Oh, the parking lot sized room also had a toilet and sink at the end of the bed. This was much more convenient than the European-styled rooms in the hotel, which forced guests to use a common bathroom.

I slept very sound my first night, even though the metal IKEA bed/storage combo was not very comfortable – I don’t think it was supposed to be. This was an experiential vacation, after all. The sore muscles and kinks in my neck were all part of the package deal.

My vacation started to sour, however, the next morning. After a long day of traveling and getting settled in, I wanted to do nothing more on my first morning than sleep in a bit before checking out the hotel’s activities. But, alas, a staff member knocked on my door just as the sun was coming up. I stood up and he declared loudly that I counted. While affirming, this counting exercise grew old very quickly as it was not only customary to do four times a day; it was mandatory.

At first, the facility's activities appeared to be vast. The hotel advertised two outdoor tracks, three outdoor basketball courts, one indoor court, a softball field, soccer field, and fitness gym. But, the gym and indoor court were closed frequently due to "staffing shortages." Although, this seemed odd both to me and to other guests because there always seemed to be plenty of staff simply milling about the place. The closed gym meant that, by hotel policy, no one was qualified to provide guests with access to the softball bat, gloves, and balls, nor provide access to the basketballs and soccer balls.

The facility also boasted of an auditorium space, which hosted frequent concerts, and a number of rooms dedicated to special programs. The concerts were painful – quite literally – and should be avoided by future guests at all costs. Someone set the volume at each performance to such a level that it would have been too loud for a football stadium, let alone a 200-seat auditorium. At the one concert I did attend, the fillings in my teeth rattled to each beat, and I left with an excruciating migraine.

The programs in the various rooms were okay. Nothing too exciting. There was a lot of talking in groups; a fair amount of griping. The coffee served was good and seemed to be the highlight for many of the other guests.

The biggest frustration with the auditorium and program rooms, however, was that when there was an event that I was much looking forward to attending, the venue would be closed. The hotel staff expressed their apologies, but said that it was due to "operational needs." Some staff members seemed as perplexed as the guests about the closings. You could often hear the staff members murmuring to each other when they clustered together around the hotel, looking confused and complaining about the hotel's management and guests.

Oh, I'm supposed to talk about the hotel's food in my post. People like to know what the food is like. I think I can sum it up in one word: horrible. I know that this was supposed to be a themed hotel experience, but the food was perhaps a bridge too far. At one meal, I was served a

soup that consisted of mushy carrots in tepid water. At another meal, I discovered mash potatoes with the consistency of drywall paste laced with an odd faux-garlic taste. And, I don't care that they called it "Chicken Stew" on Monday, "Chicken with Gravy" on Wednesday, and "Chicken with Broccoli and Rice" on Friday, it was all chicken stew! And, it was pretty lousy.

At one serving of this reoccurring dish, a whole chicken head was found floating in the serving pan. At first, I thought the cranium to be a mere prop, like the rum barrels in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disney Land. But then, I noticed a staff member dash out the door with the chicken head in a plastic bag. The meal continued.

Usually, these reviews are written in the warm afterglow of a vacation. The refreshed traveler logs on to this site after boring all of their friends with a PowerPoint presentation featuring more than a thousand photos which detail each moment of the trip, and after wasting the first week back at the office regaling travel stories to jealous co-workers who had to use their vacation days to visit their sick parents in the hospital or to cover for the two days they had been stuck in Cleveland's airport during a blizzard after last year's corporate human resource training event. But, regrettably, I could not wait until I returned home to post my review because, quite frankly, I am unsure at this moment when I will be returning home.

I have spent months wandering around this hotel in search of the check-out desk. When I ask staff members for help, they look at me with their puzzled expressions and mumble something to me that sounds like "life without parole." Then, they return to their clustered gatherings.

The "life without parole" thing rings a bell. I remember seeing the term L-W-O-P, *L-WOP* on one of the brochures when I checked in. I had simply thought LWOP was like doo-wop and that it would be another brutally loud concert in the auditorium.

In desperation, I have broken into an office while staff members are clustered elsewhere at the moment. I am writing this review so others don't make the same

mistake I did and book a vacation at this hotel. Whatever you do, if you see an ad for – Wait a second, I think I hear someone coming. No, wait! I just needed to post – What do you mean that I am not supposed to have unmonitored contact with the outside world? Wait! What do you mean accessing the Internet is a violation of policy? No, I do not want to visit the Quiet Rooms again!

Amendment to my previous post – It is now six months later. I am out of the Quiet Rooms, which I now learn most guests call "The Hole." I still have not been able to locate the check-out desk and have again broken into an office to finish my post.

I realized during my time in The Hole that I had failed to offer a rating before I was handcuffed and carried away. Below, you will see that I have given this themed hotel two out of five stars.

The days are brutal and boring, the activities are limited, the food is terrible, and the accommodations are uncomfortable. Why the two stars? I was told at check-in that this vacation would be unlike any other I had taken. It has clearly lived up to that billing. ♦

