

Photos by Thomas Patterson for USA TODAY

Nothing to sneeze at: Hotel Monaco Portland, a Kimpton Hotel, has 25 rooms that are hypoallergenic.

Hotels court allergy sufferers

Some rooms 'hypoallergenic'

By Roger Yu
USA TODAY

Frequent business traveler Stephanie Dickey often stays at upscale hotels as a globe-trotting sales executive.

But she never leaves her home in Richmond, Texas, without her own bed sheet, shampoo and soap. Suffering from allergies to many items commonly found on the road — latex, foam, shellfish, nuts, chemicals in cleaning products — Dickey travels with four allergy medicines and a pen used to deliver epinephrine for acute reactions.

"Travel is a challenge," says Dickey. "I have to clean all surfaces to avoid contact, but I can still get reactions. Often, I'll go for feather pillows because it is the lesser of the two evils. But I wake up congested and with red eyes because I'm allergic. I am an extreme case."

Spring is the cruelest season for allergy-prone business travelers such as Dickey, whose trips away from familiar environs expose them frequently to the vagaries of the housekeeping policies of hotels, airlines and airports. About 40 million Americans suffer from allergies, according to Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Frequent business travelers with allergies, asthma or general intolerance know that offensive air, food and odors are unavoidable parts of their jobs. But after years of suffering in silence, they're starting to see their needs addressed by the travel industry, which is constantly on the lookout for new amenities and sales opportunities.

Hotels are setting aside — and charging more for — rooms that they claim are "hypoallergenic," thoroughly cleaned to reduce dust mites, bacteria



On the hypoallergenic floor: Fragrance-free soaps, lotions and shampoos are available on request at Hotel Monaco in Portland, Ore.

and other irritants. They're using "greener" cleaning products. New menus reflect changes to cater to shellfish-, gluten- or lactose-intolerant guests.

The issue is coming to the fore because allergy-prone travelers are more assertive about expressing their conditions, and a general wellness campaign to avoid harmful products has gone mainstream.

"What's good for the planet also tends to be pretty good for people. So you're seeing environmental products being advertised as health products," says Mark Petruzzi of Green Seal, a non-profit organization that certifies environmentally friendly commercial products.

Feel better here

Eager to woo customers, hotels have seized on the wellness trend with new rooms for allergy sufferers.

According a 2010 survey by the American Hotel & Lodging Association, 38% of hotels have an allergy-friendly option. Hotels providing air purifiers more than doubled to 25% of respondents, up from 12% in 2008.

At Hotel Monaco Portland, Ore., part of the Kimpton Hotel chain, guests can request one of 25 rooms that are cleaned with procedures being tested by Kimpton.

For the rooms, housekeepers use vacuum cleaners with filters that trap pollen and dust mites, and fragrance- and chemical-free cleaning products certified by Green Seal.

Synthetic comforters and pillows that don't use down are a standard. Fragrance-free soaps, lotions and shampoos are available on request.

"It might be a low minority of people who have allergies. But as you move through life, you think about chemicals and wellness," says Craig Thompson, the hotel's manager. "It's becoming more mainstream all the time."

Joseph Cooke, an allergy sufferer, dreads trips to the East Coast this time of the year.

"Pine pollen is nearly disabling," says the Jamul, Calif., resident. But he trudges on, meeting with clients for his job as an airport and maritime security consultant, a gig that lets him fly frequently on private planes and

bypass the air on commercial jets.

But in hotels, air filters aren't replaced as often as he'd like. "At most hotels, that will happen the same day minibar prices become reasonable," Cooke says.

In meeting demands of allergic customers, hotels also see a business opportunity.

Hyatt has made hypoallergenic rooms a "brand standard," meaning all properties will eventually be required to have a portion of rooms in the system.

Brian Brault, CEO of Pure Solutions, a Cheektowaga, N.Y.-based company that sold and maintains the service for Hyatt, says his company uses seven methods to clean rooms, including its own air purifier, use of tea tree oil known for its antimicrobial and disinfectant properties, and encasements for mattress and pillow covers to protect from dust mite allergens.

Other properties, including some Doubletrees, Hiltons, Marriotts and Sheratons, are also clients.

Pure Solutions' sales have grown five-fold in the last year, with 250 hotel clients now, vs. 50 a year ago, Brault says.

Sales soared in the last year after it began letting hotels adopt the program without upfront, \$2,400-a-room costs. Pure Solutions now installs equipment at no cost, but hotels agree to split the \$25 average premium that the rooms fetch, Brault says.

Paul Williams, an allergy specialist at Northwest Allergy & Asthma Center in Mount Vernon, Wash., says most upscale hotels already clean rooms well enough for most allergy-ridden customers. Instead of selling special rooms at premium prices, the industry should develop standards on "reasonable options" for allergy sufferers, he says.

"There really isn't any scientific evidence to support some of those (hypoallergenic claims)," he says. "People are paying money they don't need to pay, but it's their choice."