



Avoid Hotel Renovation Regret

Six questions to ask before staying at a new property

By Christopher Elliott, Travel columnist
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I'm not sure how a fully inflated beach ball got in my hotel room. The ornamental blue vase next to the flat-screen TV? Not entirely certain about that, either.

But shortly after we checked in for the weekend, the two met. My four-year-old son couldn't wait to get to the beach so he could play with his new toy. He pitched it to me, and when I bounced it back — crash! — the blow-up ball collided with the ceramic décor, splintering the vase into a thousand tiny shards. Chaos ensued.

I mention this oopsie because it could repeat itself a time or two during the coming months. It might even happen to you.

Hotels typically renovate at the end of the year because occupancy rates are at their lowest levels, according to Dean Singer, a designer with Design360unlimited, a Marina Del Rey, Calif.-based design firm that has worked on renovation projects for hotels such as Fairmont, Loews, Hyatt, and Marriott.

The upgrades don't always go as planned.

I phoned the front desk at our resort to report the shattered container, and to my surprise, the receptionist was apologetic. "I can't believe they put those vases in the new rooms," she told me. "Especially since you're here with three kids." Housekeeping arrived soon afterward to vacuum the bits of glass off the rug. But those weren't the hotel's only redesign flaws. The next morning, I almost lost my thumb when I closed a sliding bathroom door.

Needless to say, newly refurbished rooms like the one we happened to be staying in sometimes don't meet guest expectations.

How to prevent these design screw-ups? "The best cautionary measures any hotel can take, to prevent major design blunders, is to have a trained, experienced design director or consultant overseeing the changes," says Oliver Soh, a partner at Seventh Art Group, a New York design firm. "Also, they have to know their core clientele and the clientele they're looking to attract."

What should you ask before you stay in a remodeled hotel? Here's what the experts told me:

How do you avoid getting stuck in one of these tragically redesigned rooms? "I always ask to see a room first," says Barclay Butera, a Los Angeles designer. He looks for all of the obvious design flaws, and if he sees them, asks for another room.