



The “Road Trip” to Cleanliness

BY MICHAEL SHINDLER, PRESIDENT*

*My wife and I decided that the increasing heat and more rapidly increasing COVID 19 cases in Arizona required us to end our extended winter stay at our home in Phoenix and return to Chicago. We decided to drive, visit our son and daughter-in-law in Denver and use the trip to review the cleanliness standards – **the generality of which I have decried many, many times** – in the hotels in which we stayed.*

In order to avoid irritating my wife any more than I normally do (after 43 years of marriage, that’s a pretty high bar), we established a few ground rules before we set out, as follows:

- Plan where each day’s stop would be and make a reservation at the selected hotel there
- Stop every 2 – 3 hours for gas, snack, bathroom breaks and leg stretch
- No Mini-Mart or Truck Stop hot dogs
- Wear mask anytime outside of the car

I am pleased to say that we fulfilled the rules for the entire trip. Our itinerary found us stopping in Las Vegas, NM, on Wednesday evening, June 24, Denver on Thursday and Friday evening, June 25 and 26, and Council Bluffs, IA, on Saturday, June 27.

Wanting to stay in different brands’ hotels, we had reservations at the **Best Western Plus Montezuma** in NM, **The Maven at Dairy Block** in LoDo in Denver (an independent hotel operated by Sage Hospitality) and the **Hilton Garden Inn** in Council Bluffs, IA. Two of these offered the opportunity to review the execution of two major brands’ cleanliness standards – Best Western’s “*We Care Clean*” and Hilton’s “*Clean Stay*” – and observe how the hotels along the way were dealing with guests wearing (or not) masks while inside the hotels.

A discussion of each and its grade are below.

Best Western Plus

Upon arrival at the porte cochere, I ran into the hotel to check in. At the front door, the hotel had placed a large, rubber-backed rug so guests and others coming and going could wipe their feet. The rug itself was filthy; it looked as if it had not been vacuumed in a day or so (we arrived in the late afternoon, so it most definitely had not been cleaned during the day). Hardly an auspicious start.

Upon check-in, I handed my driver's license and credit card to the Front Desk Clerk; there was no sign of Best Western's "Mobile Concierge platform." She handed me a registration form to sign, returned my driver's license and credit card and gave me our key packet. We were asked to acknowledge the terms of the stay on an electronic pad, the stylus to which was used by every guest checking in, without evidence of post-use cleaning. To the hotel's credit, there was a vertical banner on a stand across from the front desk where Best Western's cleanliness steps were broadly described, and, leading to the elevator, there was a Purel Hand Sanitizer dispenser on the wall. Also, at the Front Desk, there was a young woman who appeared to be a friend of the attendant; she stood off to the side, masked, awaiting a lull in the attendant's workload. I noticed that she was there for some 15 – 20 minutes; she most certainly was not a hotel guest.

After checking in, we parked and used the side entrance to the hotel; it securely required use of the card key to gain entry, and there was placed a slightly smaller rubber-backed rug. It, too, was filthy (even dirtier than the one at the front door), indicating that it had not been cleaned or replaced during the day. It was also curled up on one corner, creating a walking hazard for someone, like my wife, who uses a cane to assist her walking. (There was also a long (10' or so) ladder leaning against the rather narrow hallway, about three feet on the inside of the dirty rug; that has nothing to do with cleanliness, but it might have something to do with safety.) There was no Purel Hand Sanitizer Dispenser at the side entrance nor was there one at the rear entrance (I did not check the rug at the rear entrance).

The elevator had a posted sign indicating that only family groups could ride together, and, for the most part during our 12 hours at the hotel, that restriction was observed by all guests. Masks, on the other hand, while not mandatory in New Mexico, were less present. Of course, when people were leaving the hotel, they mostly wore masks. But, walking down the hall (I saw one family that appeared to be three generations, with the grandparents in one room, and the parents and kids in another) to another room, the handful of people I saw were maskless. With one exception (noted below), all employees we encountered were wearing masks.

En route to the elevator and the guest room, we noted that the corridor carpet was dingy and dirty. The guest room was cleaned, and, per BW protocols, all non-essential soft goods were removed. The room was equipped with a coffee maker and wrapped paper coffee cups, there were two plastic (wrapped) cups in the bathroom, and all amenities were single use. In-room coffee was digestible. Unfortunately, an opened and, apparently, used bar of bath soap sat in the shower soap dish; it had not been removed by housekeeping.

The "Grab & Go" breakfast (in lieu of the buffet) consisted of a small bottle of water, a small wrapped muffin, a mixed fruit cup and a granola bar. It was not "enhanced" (per BW guidelines) by any stretch of the imagination, though I truly did not expect more.

As we loaded up the car, I noticed that the BW ice machine dispenser was in use and functioning, so I used the ice bucket from our room to ice our cooler for the road. Many hotels during this COVID crisis have discontinued the use of ice machines, though I was not troubled by that.

Upon check-out, the Front Desk Clerk (a different young woman from her who checked us in) did not need our card, but she located the pre-printed receipt in a stack of them, thumbed through them to find ours and handed it to me. She did not inquire whether I might prefer an emailed receipt. She also wore her mask intermittently during the time we awaited her attention to our check out.

The Maven at Dairy Block (Denver Downtown)

Arrival at The Maven meant pulling up to the curb in front of the hotel and standing while unloading the car for check-in. Before entering the Hotel, I masked up – discovering at the entry a sign that indicated that all entering the building must wear a mask – to retrieve a luggage cart. I did that, loaded the cart and pushed it into the hotel lobby, accompanied by my wife. During our stay, all employees wore masks, and, though the mask rules were not enforced visibly against guests, most guests complied with the rules.

I observed at the front desk the placement of plexiglass shields at the two stations, with a small slot at the bottom of the plexiglass for handing anything back and forth. There was hand sanitizer at both stations. My wife sat at a table in the lobby where she was given a bottle of water for herself and one for me. The entire check-in process was contactless (with one minor exception): the key card device and blank key cards (to allow access) were at the guest side of the partition, as was the credit card reader; once my card was inserted by me and its information recorded, the attendant directed me to take a blank key card and place it onto the device, whereupon she activated the key. There was nothing to sign. She handed me a key envelope, and it was necessary for her to hand me a sheet of paper with a QR code on it for access to and from the hotel's parking garage. *[Disclosure: We were comped as "friends and family" by the management company, Sage Hospitality. The front desk attendant did not know that until I checked in, and she saw that there would be no room charges.]*

Upon returning to the lobby after parking the car, my wife and I took the luggage cart to the elevator, where posted signs indicated that only family groups of fewer than four persons should ride the elevator at one time. On a couple of occasions during our two-night (36 hour) stay, either we or another couple deferred to the next arriving lift to observe the posted rules. There were hand-sanitizer dispensers on each elevator landing.

Upon arrival to our room, we noted that, other than bed linens and chair and sofa cushions, there were no extraneous pillows or other soft goods. The room was immaculately clean. Interestingly, The Maven did not remove in-room telephones *[we were in a suite, so there were two]*, and the remote controls

[two TV's] were not plastic-encased or otherwise presented with any indication of special cleaning. We were advised that there would be no service during our brief stay; as it happened, we had an issue with the battery in one of the remotes, and engineering did enter the room with our permission.

Bath/shower amenities (shampoo, body wash and conditioner) were contained in separate wall-mounted dispensers in the shower.

The Maven offered coffee service (by means of a large coffee urn) in the lobby each morning; all cups were individually wrapped, though the lids were not. We did not use the in-room electric kettle, provided with individual tea bags (of a variety of flavors) nor the individual pour-over coffee selections.

We repeated the process with the luggage cart for checkout, and the check-out itself was entirely contactless, with my final bill (for the parking) sent to me by email (instigated at the attendant's inquiry).

Hilton Garden Inn, Omaha East/Council Bluffs

Let me start this section by saying that there was almost nothing appealing about the Hilton Garden Inn, Omaha East/Council Bluffs. Unbeknownst to me when I made the reservation (on Hotels.com), this hotel is adjacent to the Horseshoe Casino by Harrah's in Council Bluffs. The Casino had reopened by the time we arrived, and the parking lot manifested that; the fire lanes had cars parked in them – with no enforcement (as, per the front desk clerk, that was handled by the Casino) – from our arrival Saturday afternoon until our departure on Sunday morning. The parking lot itself was rutted and, in some places, cracked asphalt.

At check-in, there were signs on the floor, hand sanitizers (one good thing the hotel did was to position sanitizer dispensers throughout) and mask-wearing employees. Unfortunately, the same was not true for the majority of the guests, who, for the most part, ignored the social distancing guidelines as well. Check-in was partially contactless; I showed my driver's license as identification, but I did not hand it over, but I did give the front desk clerk my credit card. He handed it back to me along with the key cards in a card envelope. I inquired about the use of a luggage cart, and, looking where it was usually staged, he commented that "they have not brought it down yet."

We proceeded to our room, which lacked the Hilton Clean Stay seal (that is, the one that promises that it is "*placed on the door upon [the room] being thoroughly cleaned;*" I wonder if we are to believe the converse when there is none). The room did have two disinfectant wipes in individual packages (but no individual bottles of hand sanitizer). This was merely the beginning of the failures of this hotel.

I returned to the front desk to ask the clerk about the lack of the Clean Stay seal. Sadly, he had no

idea about what I was asking; he simply did not know about the Hilton guidelines on room cleaning. Fortunately for us, the Hotel Assistant Manager was there, so I redirected my question to him, and he cleared it up by responding (and this is a direct quote, because I wrote it down as soon as I could), *"maybe the housekeeper on that floor ran out of them."* He did not express concern about the housekeeper's supply shortage, nor about the sanctity of the brand promise that might have prompted someone to get extra seals and return to the floor, nor the abject failure to inspect the room after the housekeeper stopped cleaning it (as the lack of a seal was quite obvious). Still, we persisted.

I found the by-then returned luggage cart (which was in its last throes of functionality, probably because it was being rolled from cars over the broken asphalt in the parking lot and being left upstairs for who-knows-what kinds of abuse it might have undergone), proceeded to my car, loaded the luggage cart and returned to the room.

Though there were posted signs on the elevator reminding users to ride only in family groups, that was not observed by some guests. After dinner on Saturday evening, we entered the elevator (masked), and then another couple (also masked) followed us in, effectively ignoring the posted signs.

The room was devoid of extra cushions, the bedspread had been removed, there was no telephone, and the TV remote had a paper wrapper around it, all consistent with Hilton's guidelines. The room itself, though in need of renovation was clean and comfortable, as was most of the bathroom. The bath amenities were single user. However, I took a shower on Saturday evening before we went to dinner, and I reached to the soap dish to place my bar of soap and was dismayed to discover a long hair in the soap dish (one of the areas in Hilton's Clean Stay infographic specifically called out as one of the *"High-Touch, Deep Clean Areas"* in a guest room; not this one).

The elevator landing areas were a mess. On Saturday evening, returning from dinner, we noted at the fourth floor (our room floor) landing a plastic bag containing Styrofoam containers from another guest's take-out; on Sunday morning, that bag was still there, and a companion bag (also with Styrofoam containers) was observed next to it on the table. When we arrived at the first floor, on the corresponding table was another, similar bag (yet again with Styrofoam containers), and, on the floor next to the table, there was a dirty, scrunched up bath towel.

Check-out was uneventful, and the morning desk clerk took my email address to send me the receipt. As Hilton Garden Inns have a restaurant (this one was closed at all times except breakfast and cocktail hour), there was no grab-and-go opportunity. The restaurant patrons at our check-out time were sparse and generally separated, but we did not waste time lingering at this hotel.

Truth be told, this was an epic fail. The hotel operator, Kinseth Hospitality, the hotel owner (whom I presume to be Caesars Entertainment), the General Manager (who, in subsequent email

correspondence after I filled out a post-departure guest survey, attributed the challenges to the short training time for the employees) and the Hotel Assistant General Manager are all to blame, and, frankly, so, too, is Hilton for publishing guidelines and not procedures and for advertising even those guidelines (quoting Chris Nassetta, President & CEO of Hilton) as an assurance of ***“the peace of mind and confidence our guests need to travel freely”***.

Not this time, Chris, not this time.

OBSERVATIONS, CONCLUSIONS & GRADES		
Best Western	The Maven (Independent)	Hilton Garden Inn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dirty first impression (and mostly consistently so throughout) – entry rugs, corridor carpet • No “contactless” check-in or check-out • Clerk at check-out wore mask intermittently • Only one hand sanitizer dispenser, rather than in “all public areas” • Ice machine available/in use • Open soap bar left in shower • Grab & Go breakfast was hardly “enhanced” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great first impression; ‘required mask’ sign was posted on front door • Virtually 100% contactless check-in and checkout • All employees masked • Hand sanitizer throughout • Telephones and remotes in-room had no indication of special attention • Unusual (post-COVID) to see other than individual bath amenities • Surprised (though not put off) by lobby coffee urn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of the Safe Seal • Front desk clerk entirely unaware of the Safe Seal • Hotel Assistant Manager throwing a housekeeper under the bus • No supervision or oversight of the room cleaning process • A hair from a prior guest in the shower soap dish • Minimal enforcement of mask-wearing by guests • Limited separation in elevators • Trash not picked up during the night between 7:30 pm and 6:45 am
<p>The appearance of dirtiness was the most off-putting aspect of our stay. Addressing COVID 19 would seem to require not just protocols, but actual cleanliness, and that reality was not present.</p>	<p>Clearly, this property is applying Sage standards and procedures for cleanliness and sanitation (not published) consistently, if our brief stay is a good indicator.</p>	<p>I could not be more disappointed about this hotel; Hilton was first out of the box with “Clean Stay” guidelines and cranked up its PR machine to support the initiative. Chris and his team should have put more effort into training and oversight of implementation, and Kinseth should train better.</p>
C	A minus	FAIL