

Asian Travel (A Special Report) --- Dis-Service: In the U.S., Technology Deletes Human Touch From the Mix --- While U.S. Travelers Often Find Themselves Treated More Like Commodities Than Valued Guests, a Small Laotian Hotel Still Gets It Right

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

My favorite hotel in Asia is a small place in the Laotian city of Luang Prabang called the Villa Santi. This charming old house has almost no facilities and only one restaurant of moderate repute. The Spartan rooms have no telephones or televisions. One is awakened at dawn by cocks crowing and children arriving at the neighboring grade school. But the Villa Santi offers the best service I've ever had at any hotel.

It's based on a complicated, little-understood system known as a "person." You hand this person your passport, ticket and luggage and then head for your drink in the garden. Upon checking out, you are given your boarding pass, driven out to the airport and walked straight up to the plane. No standing in line, no dragging bags through airport halls, no snarling bureaucrats.

Service industries in the U.S. have become like those Japanese love motels that are designed so customers can check in and out without ever encountering anyone who might give them a knowing smirk. People seem to have been eliminated entirely in favor of technology that often isn't much help. I've stayed in hotels in America that seem to be staffed by one person who races around like a solo yachtsman, trying to keep all the automated gizmos from breaking down. Irritatingly, hotels insist that this has been done for your benefit. Beware those dreaded words: "For your convenience."

FULL TEXT

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It's a simple place, but one where the milk of human kindness doesn't come in a tiny foil-topped plastic pot designed to squirt over your shirt as you open it. Luxury hardly matters when you have conscientious, kind-hearted service from people who enjoy their work. I often think of the Villa Santi when I'm traveling and I smile wistfully to myself

before harsh reality intrudes again.

In our high-tech, fast-paced world, we forget a fundamental truth: that no technology, no Web site, no automated call center can be as helpful as another human being. This is something that is close to being forgotten in the U.S., where moving from one place to another involves exploring inner circles of hell that eluded Dante's fevered imagination. Around the world, countries are looking to emulate the technological success of the U.S., but when it comes to services, they'd be well advised to pause a moment.

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Hotel rooms are littered with signs like: "For your convenience, we offer a self-service breakfast buffet." What they mean is that to reduce costs, a subcontractor has come in at 4 a.m. and laid out a plate of muffins -- much fingered by hands unseen -- and filled a vat with superheated toxic sludge masquerading as coffee. "For your convenience, there is no business center but there is a 24-hour copy shop." Never mind that it is 22 blocks away in a high-crime neighborhood with no parking. You're welcome.

The U.S. is also a country where airports appear to host historical re-enactments of the fall of Saigon every Friday night as frantic crowds try to get the last flight out. On board the plane, airlines no longer pretend to offer any service. On America West -- second on my list of the world's worst carriers after Ariana Afghan Airlines -- the cabin staff announce they are only there to satisfy federal safety regulations and if you expect anything more you're, like, totally deluded.

As the gulf between business and economy classes grows, the fetid masses in the back of the plane are getting restive, knowing that they are denied even the most basic amenities while a lucky few up front are reclining on their sumptuous palanquins and eating peeled grapes. With gritted teeth, the inequities and unpleasantness of travel can be endured as long as everything goes according to plan, but when it all falls apart, there's no one to hear you scream. Spend an hour trying to find someone to complain to while navigating the electronic limbo of an automated telephone system and you start to understand where the Unabomber was coming from.

Has the inevitable backlash begun? The fractious U.S. Congress seems to be energized and even united over a passenger bill of rights that will prevent some of the worst abuses by airlines, such as overbooking. The credit-card company Discover now boasts that if you call its help line you are actually allowed to talk to a real live person. American Express is pushing its Centurion Card, which comes with personal travel concierges on call 24 hours a day. Although the card costs a few thousand dollars a year, maybe it's worth it just to have a few precious moments of human contact.

Part of the problem is the cumbersome design of so many automated systems. Airline Web sites are evolving, but they don't give you the full range of prices and it can be enormously time-consuming checking out different flight options. You can still save a lot of money and time talking to a proficient travel agent. Although airlines have mastered the programs that make sure every flight nowadays is crammed to no-elbow-room capacity, they're not using those computer skills to develop customer-friendly Web sites.

The United Airlines site is overly complex, requiring you to log in again and again. Other sites are far from robust and seem to crash frequently. A Web site for the trendy W Hotel chain crashed my computer three times, blasted me with irritating music and wasted an hour of my time before I found out the hotel I wanted to stay in was full, a fact I could have gotten from a two-minute phone call.

I'm not against technology -- I think seat back TV screens are the greatest advance in aviation since Orville and Wilbur Wright got it all started. But when technology is just about reducing costs and cutting staff, as was the business fashion in the early 1990s, it can cause service standards to plummet. Now, many U.S. companies are struggling to boost standards again, but it is difficult to recover a service culture that has been lost. It is even harder to get back a good reputation dulled by penny-pinching.

Asian airlines and hotels have reacted to the downturn in recent years by putting more money into training and service. In the U.S., the Singapore Girl would have been downsized and living in a trailer park outside Tulsa waiting for her lawyer to cough up the proceeds of her sexual-harassment lawsuit. In Singapore, she's alive, well, and being trained to come up with imaginative ways to help customers. She's not being replaced by technology, simply enhanced by it.

Few regional companies have much to learn from U.S. carriers or hotel chains, but one lesson is that they shouldn't be seduced by the siren song of technology at the expense of what customers want.

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