

Back to the...
Hotel

A CLEAN SWEEP

In the final experience in this series, Lionel Prodgers works behind the scenes at the Hilton Gatwick Airport hotel

Photography: Justin Lambert

Staying in hotel resorts all across the world, it's easy for me to take for granted the sheer amount of work involved in preparing a guest room, so my final experience in this series proved to be more than an eye opener.

I've had my fair share of airport experiences – last time I joined the frontline fray with the OCS Passengers with Reduced Mobility team at London Heathrow. On this occasion, my mission to return to the sharp end of facilities management led me to step behind the scenes as a room attendant at Gatwick's Hilton Hotel.

Only 30 minutes from central London, the Hilton is a full-service hotel with a guest relations team on hand to meet all needs. With a staggering 821 rooms to look after and the majority of guests checking in at 3pm and checking out at 12pm, the pressure is on.

Without a minute to lose I'm introduced to the Omni operations team for a briefing on the day ahead.

Omni Facilities Management is currently one of the preferred suppliers to Hilton Hotels nationwide. Providing housekeeping solutions to the hotel chain. Richard Jackson, operations director at Omni, explains that, alongside his colleague Barbara Parbat, area manager of HCS & Co (the hotel trading division of Omni FM), he oversees 40 room attendants, 10 supervisors and 10 porters. No easy task, it seems. Everything is immediate – particularly as this is an airport hotel which must react to flight cancellations at any time during the day.

But before my day commences it's a change of attire for me. Off with my business suit and into something more comfortable. Glamour flies out of the window, and with my black shoes, black trousers and a purple work shirt neatly tucked in, I'm ready to hit the floor.

With my uniform in place it's onto the health and safety briefing. The team inform me of the various assembly points for fire, where to go and where not to go. A day's training is quickly crammed into a few hours before I am let loose into the hotel – quite a daunting prospect.

But first things first; a trip down to the laundry room

where linen is sorted. I watch in fascination as laundry is fed through a chute and attendants rally around industriously in a flawlessly choreographed system. You would think a day sorting sheets, pillows and towels could be mind-numbingly dull but there's much more to it than first meets the eye. I am watching only the first stage in a thorough quality check on the linen; items showing wear are separated into another process for replacement by the linen hire contractor.

Boredom is not an option down here, for as soon as one chute of laundry is cleared, another huge mountain descends on the staff. And it's not just linen items which fall through – TV remote controls and children's toys come tumbling down, knotted in between the vast amounts of linen.

If you've ever seen the BBC period drama *Downton Abbey* or *Upstairs, Downstairs* you'll be aware of the hectic hustle and bustle of life for those servants working in the basement of a grand country manor. The Hilton operation resembles this industrial-scale hospitality with a large team managing huge arrangements underneath the hotel. The staff is very much like actors in a stage show, all playing their part

backstage leading up to one final performance.

An hour or two later, my morning duties completed, I am briefed by Omni team members before I can shadow room attendant Priska as she begins her eight-hour shift.

Carrying out room attendant duties, I discover, is highly demanding and requires great efficiency, energy and organisation. The Hilton has a clear quality control guide in place which requires supervisors to spot check every single room before it can be released to guests. It was interesting to discover that, just like offices, hotel rooms are inspected against a measuring system with a 100 point check list. Rooms are scored accordingly as to whether they meet criteria or not. Each room must be cleaned and prepared to the same high standard, one point lost means a 1 per cent deduction from the performance score target of 100 per cent.

Newly appointed, I'm under the watchful eye of Ludmilla Kapleraitiene, a contract manager for HCS & Co. Her strict regime is impressive, with nothing left to chance.

Room attendants usually transform around 18 rooms on a normal six-hour shift but Priska, who I



The hotel is a 30-minute drive from London and boasts 821 rooms





am shadowing for the day has been tasked with an extra two. In just 20 minutes I have to transform the room, leaving it sparkling for the next arrivals. Before the attendants enter the room a trolley is carefully equipped with cleaning products, toiletries, a vacuum cleaner, tea, coffee, biscuits and waste bags. Waste is divided into two sacks – plastic bottles and general.

Each room is strategically swept through, checking that every single piece is in place. Starting in the bedroom I dust, pick up rubbish and remove dirty linen before moving into the bathroom and wiping down surfaces and clearing every inch. All the time I wear gloves, the golden rule of room attendance. Guests' personal belongings must remain in place – smudges and smears are simply unacceptable.

I try to help with the bed linen, but putting a duvet into a cover takes me five long minutes, whereas super speedy room attendant Priska can do it in one. Time is of the essence, and I admire her patience, tolerating my lack of experience even when I'm slowing her down.

Room dusted and cleaned, it's time to vacuum the floors and wash the wood. Corridors are cleaned once the allotted rooms have been completed. Phew, this is hard work and we're well over our 20 minutes.

What strikes me are the language barriers. Most of the staff are Eastern European and although there were some instances of miscommunication, all in all, the whole process seems to run smoothly. All of the health and safety guides are translated into different languages and staff must possess basic English to interact with guests.

Time up, and it's the return of Ludmilla for the final inspection before the room can be released back to reception for incoming guests. I hold my breath.

Any repair, decoration or anything missing – right down to the number of cloak hangers – have to be taken into account. Most of the supervision is about

seeing and feeling – using their eyes and their hands. Even if a tiny hair is found on the ground, it's swiftly picked up and disposed of. If it's something a bit more serious, like a smear on the mirror, the cleaner in question is quickly called back to rectify it.

It is quite clear that a high level of discipline is required to be a room attendant. Where you start and where you finish is critical and even leaving drawers open for inspection is expected. The supervisor's time is precious and it needs to be quick and easy for them.

But unlucky for me, on this particular day the cancellation of a Thomson flight instantly creates the demand for 160 rooms to be prepared at speed. Staff scurry into position to turnaround 160 rooms ready for the influx.

A queue quickly forms as tired passengers drift into the hotel, but they soon disperse as rooms are allocated. I'm told this was an exception – they usually work on monthly projections of the likely take up of rooms so that they can deal with the resources available and plan. If an emergency arises it seems they are capable of mobilising resources, as I witness. More room attendants are brought in and while I'm there, more rooms are allocated to the existing staff.

On the whole, it's a smooth operation and a spillage in the executive suite is cleaned up with a huge industrial machine which blew hot air at surface level. This magic machinery seems to deal with most eventualities. Smoking seems to be a challenge for attendants as a deodoriser was required for one particular room where one brazen guest had decided to ignore the hotel policy. Taking a whole hour to remove the strong smells can cause issues if the hotel is at full occupancy and guests need to check-in.

Timing is everything and while I revel in the tasks and watch the room attendants with awe, I can't help thinking I'm a disruption to the process, severely slowing them down. A great deal of tutting and sighing ensues as I weave my way around the room. But the rooms are finally returned to their former glory, much to the bemusement of the room attendants involved.

I think, in all honesty, they're relieved to see the back of me. **FM**



CLOSING THOUGHTS

LESSONS FROM BACK TO THE FLOOR

This series has been a real eye-opener, as I've experienced first hand the performance of front-line services. The common theme that binds good service delivery together is clear procedures and a healthy dose of 'team spirit'.

What has struck me from being in the thick of emergencies as they arise, whether it's 50 people needing mobility assistance without warning or 160 hotel rooms needing to be made ready and available in an instant, it is the people at the front line that make the difference. Front line staff are the people who deliver supplier promises!