

The Bathroom as Experience

(for Canadian Lodging News)

By Marni Andrews

At the 377-room Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver, Italian marble wraps bathroom floors, walls and vanities, while the choice of bathtubs includes square Japanese ofuro, spacious soakers, jetted tubs and one that resembles an exotic egg. Some are contained in spa bathrooms, while others are situated with wraparound windows and sky-high views of sea or snow-capped mountains.

The marble-floored and -walled bathrooms in Paris's swanky five-star Le Meurice hotel were recently voted best in Europe at the Villegiature Awards. They were renovated in 2008 by renowned designer Philippe Starck. Aside from the lavish use of marble and high-end fixtures, they also feature separate baths and showers, a trend that is accelerating in the industry.

Victoria, BC's Magnolia Hotel & Spa was ranked in the Top 10 Canadian hotels by Conde Nast readers two years in a row. The opulent bathrooms with both walk-in showers and deep soaker tubs were noted, according to general manager Bill Lewis.

"Our customers love the separate glass shower stall and soaker tubs. I would rate good lighting, cleanliness and upkeep as the most important features to a bathroom," says Lewis. "Customers also love upscale amenities. We currently use Aveda, with the most popular amenity being the bath bomb."

In North America, some select service brands such as Marriott Courtyard and Hyatt Place have taken the sink out of the bathroom entirely, in a related move to increase useability, and located it as part of the room, according to Dr. Gabor Forgacs of the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management. Novotel and some other European brands put the toilet in a separate room. In case of double occupancy, this of course can double the efficiency of the bathroom facilities.

"I like a separate toilet. Some business travellers share rooms so the privacy is important. Plus it's nice to not have to look at a toilet when I'm taking a shower. I also like bathrooms with dimmer switches so you can control the lighting when you first wake up. And I like a night light left on in the bathroom when I first walk into the hotel room. It's like coming home," says Salvatore Baio, CEO, West49, a Burlington, ON-based action sports executive who is frequently on the road across Canada and in the western U.S. He adds that a large bathmat in front of the sink is a great touch too, so that he is not standing on cold tiles.

"Hotels have a terrific opportunity to impress and earn the loyalty of the guest through an appealing bathroom," says Dr. Forgacs, who adds that lighting in most bathrooms is substandard, whether from badly positioned or poorly selected light fixtures that don't provide adequate light to shave or apply makeup or poorly rendered colour through cheaper (fluorescent) bulbs. Counter space, too, is often in short supply for the guest's own personal care belongings.

Not so at the Holiday Inn Express Vancouver Airport, where Andrew Maas, area director for Atlific Hotels Holiday Inn, says that guests love the bathrooms for their size, the granite countertops and the large amount of counter space.

After a renovation in 2009, the Inn at the Quay in New Westminster, BC also boasts large granite countertops with plenty of space for travellers and the only amenities line at a Canadian hotel from Cutler Salons of New York City. Director of sales Lana Berar says that bathrooms are important to guests, but especially to female travellers who want clean, uncluttered bathrooms with high quality amenities that they would use at home. She says that curved shower rods, rain showerheads and a good hair dryer are now expected by travellers.

The bath has a long and storied history. According to Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, ritual bathing was recorded in Japan as early as 297 CE, in ancient Greece the bathhouse with its marble tubs was the social centre for society, and in the Middle Ages a bath was part of the formal preparation to being knighted. Fast forward to today's hotel bathroom, where a spa-like look and feel is high on the list of leisure travellers looking to escape their everyday experience.

At WetStyle in Montreal, president Mark Wolinsky has noticed a trend in boutique hotels of the bath and the living space converging, with free-standing bathtubs increasingly being incorporated directly into the overall room design. The Nolitan in New York City used WetStyle's Ove free-standing bathtub as an element of furniture in the guestroom.

"The design community and consumers tell us they are looking to create a special bathroom experience, almost like a home-based oasis that starts with authentic and beautifully designed product, high quality craftsmanship and products made in an environmentally-conscious manner," says Wolinsky.

Business travellers, however, are largely seeking a more streamlined experience with luxurious basics but not necessarily any spa-type extras that they'll be unlikely to use.

"Towels are super important, big ones. Business travellers want their hotel bathroom to be more like their house and many business travellers have well-appointed bathrooms at home," says Larry Hahn, a Rochester, NY-based senior corporate account executive in the foodservice industry who travels frequently in the eastern U.S. "A great extra for me would be speakers in the bathroom so I can hear TV sports coverage while away from the game!"

Speakers, even TV's, have already arrived in high-end locations such as the Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver where an LCD television with high-definition channels is embedded into the bathroom mirror. With the flick of a switch, the TV comes on and the guest can watch the morning news while shaving or brushing his or her teeth. Some high-end brands are already using fog-free makeup mirrors with low-voltage electric current that heats up the mirror.

"Hotels are looking to create spa-like settings in their bathrooms so their guests can enjoy a relaxing, rejuvenating time away," agrees Peter Ashton, commercial sales development manager, Masco Canada.

"Luxurious showerheads with multiple settings and a rainlike experience are most in demand. High-end hotels are also seeking body sprays so guests can truly enjoy their in-room bathrooms."

Walk-in rain showers are more commonly requested than baths at the recently opened Hotel Le Germain Maple Leaf Square in downtown Toronto, says general manager Paul de La Durantaye. He adds that the hotel's beautiful bathrooms "are defined by light, light and more light. Natural light flows from the guest's room straight into the bathrooms, showers invite light through glass walls, and lighter wood tones add further luminosity to the bathroom space."

Scott Eveland, sales director, George Courey Inc., is seeing more of his customers improving on the size and weight of towels they're buying. Even smaller hotels and motels are improving the quality of their bath linens, he says.

Hotels know that their "guests want a luxe feel and [they want] to make their guests feel as good or better than they do in their bathroom at home," says Becki Hubley, general manager, Sani-Service Vancouver. For Vancouver, she agrees that the hottest trends and designs are "spa-like in feel, crisp and clean, that embody the feeling of the four elements: air, wind, water, fire. Everyone loves to soak in a big tub and feel like they are in a spa when staying at a nice hotel."

Hubley also notes that in addition to hotels moving to separate the shower and tub areas, showers and baths are taking on unconventional shapes. Larger rectangled shower areas, some enclosed by glass and some not, with stone or glass tile and soaker tubs in shapes more rounded and natural are sometimes featured in the middle of a room instead of against the wall.

At the Sparkling Hill Resort and Wellness Hotel in the BC interior, on a cliff high above Okanagan Lake, the custom bathtubs were manufactured specifically for them by Hytec, a Kohler company. The sides of the bathtub emulate the facets of a crystal to complement the focus of the resort, which was the first in North America to incorporate Swarovski Crystal elements into its design.

Water conservation, sustainability, hygiene

More and more hotels are providing low-flow toilets and shower heads to conserve water, placing glass cups in the bathroom rather than plastic cups or bottled water and installing wall-mounted dispensers for shampoo, conditioner and bath gel. And they are increasingly inviting guests to participate in eco-friendly practices such as reusing towels and changing beds less often.

For example, the 4-diamond Prince George Hotel in Halifax has moved away from the waste and excess packaging of individual toiletry bottles and created an environmental program called Green Prince, says Paul Weber, president Swissol Inc. Creative Body Care. Every guestroom has a handcrafted green frog wearing a crown and sitting on a lilypad with a sign asking guests to participate in the program. If the frog is left sitting on his lilypad, staff assume participation in the Green Prince program and will replace only empty bath amenities, adjust climate controls when guests are out of the room, replace only towels left on the floor and change bed linens every third day.

Weber of Swissol says that 55 per cent of his sales over the last 12 months have been his Naturals and Organic lines and his ecogreen Press+Wash tamper proof dispenser lines.

“While consumers today are looking for a unique, pampering experience at a hotel and hoteliers are catering to this demand in many ways, hotels continue to develop strategies to enhance their environmental platform. They are setting up recycling programs, offering environmentally preferable products in washrooms and opting for touchless faucets and autoflash systems,” says John Mann, vice-president, marketing, UniSource Canada, Inc.

There is a growing trend in the hotel industry to foster a “greener footprint” and our Dispenser Amenities system is low-hanging fruit in a drive to reduce waste, says Heather Manness, sales and marketing administrator, Dispenser Amenities Inc.

“Each year, the world’s hotels send billions of partly full plastic bottles of soap, shampoo, conditioner and lotion to landfills. While it’s a long established habit, it’s a very bad habit that is unsustainable. Thus the move to providing shower liquids in attractive, multi-chamber dispensers,” says Manness, who adds that hotels are adding attractive customized dispenser labeling to focus guest attention on the high quality liquids inside.

“Today’s hotel guest ‘gets it’ when it comes to waste, especially plastic bottle waste and hotels are applauded for taking this step toward waste reduction,” she says.

Kohler has just introduced the world’s first touchless faucet with a battery system designed to remain operable for at least 30 years, according to Donna Church, marketing and communications, Kohler Canada. In addition, Kohler’s Insight Technology will automatically calibrate its setting to allow for low lighting or highly reflective lighting, which ultimately saves resources by eliminating false activations. Church notes that conservation is important since Canada uses 122 billion litres of water daily.

“Our most popular bathroom products are ‘touchless’ (e.g., automatic soap dispensers or mechanical towel dispensers) and environmentally friendly,” says David Pare, vice-president of marketing, Pure Planet Solutions & Affiliates. He says that customers have become more pragmatic regarding environmental, cost and health concerns with the push to reduce “cross contamination” points with Touchless washroom fixtures using environmentally friendly products the number one priority.

“Our customers are willing to invest more in environmentally friendly, health-conscious products to meet their customers’ expectations. Most of the time these changes are seamless and are not always evident to the user. The most important thing our accounts can do is promote these changes in their washrooms with decals and placards that state the benefit of the products.”

Patrick Boshell, marketing manager, Deb Canada, notes that there is a growing preference for scent-free and dye-free products that are environmentally friendly. Foam soaps are popular in hotel settings as they generate lather quickly and rinse easily leaving no residue on hands or in sinks. Foam soap is also economical as it goes farther than lotion soaps. Boshell says that foam saves water too, as lather can be applied directly to dry hands before rinsing, saving approximately 45 per cent of water consumption.

“Many hotels want to promote their environmental leadership for guests by using skin care products that are EcoLogo certified. In the guestroom we are seeing a move away from personal size shampoo to using a 1- or 2-L hair and body shampoo dispenser in the shower. As the product is EcoLogo certified and the amount of wasted packaging is significantly reduced, it’s a big hit with environmentally-conscious guests,” explains Boshell.

British fashion retailer French Connection is getting into the amenities game too. They have partnered with Concept Amenities to manufacture a collection of environmentally-responsible guestroom toiletries. The packaging is made with Eco Pure[®], an organic additive that allows plastic to fully biodegrade to water and carbon dioxide within a few years.

The Xlerator hand dryer by Excel Dryer, Inc. dries hands three times faster than conventional hand dryers and uses 80 per cent less energy, according to William Gagnon, vice-president of marketing and key accounts, Excel Dryer, Inc. He claims that Xlerator delivers a 95 per cent cost savings when compared to paper towels and eliminates maintenance and waste while creating a more hygienic environment.

Finishes, colors

At the 18-month old Le Westin Montreal, sales and marketing coordinator Karren Landry, which offers the fully customizable Heavenly Shower[®] experience, says that trends in color and styles are Zen, brown beige, and a clean slick look based on granite, tiles and glass.

Kevin Neville, commercial business development, Bath Fitter, which offers custom molded bathtub and shower solutions that fit over existing fixtures, is seeing more natural earth tones, ceramic floor tiles in darker colors and vanity tops that are darker still. For shower walls, he says that designers are looking at natural looking stones with textures and sometimes satin finishes.

“Trends are leaning toward natural stone finishes such as granites and marbles that have texture and depth of color. Vanity tops are being converted from lighter cultured marbles to darker granite surfaces in browns and charcoals even blacks to contrast with white sinks and white tubs,” says Neville.

Gagnon of Excel Dryer says that architects and interior designers are asking for customized finishes for the Xlerator hand dryer. The XL-SI offers exclusive digital imaging technology that allows buyers to design their own hand dryer with company logos, designs or a green message that communicates their organization’s sustainability commitment.

Finishes such as chrome and stainless steel are the most popular; they look modern and are highly durable and easy to clean, says Ashton of Masco.

With today’s consumers looking for a unique, pampering experience at a hotel along with eco-friendly awareness, it’s important for hoteliers to realize that careful selection of products and services can yield a win-win for everyone involved. Ultimately, the hotel bathroom experience is about stress release. Deliver on this front, and success is assured.