

HOTEL SECURITY: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

By Jim Stover, Arthur J. Gallagher

Since the recent tragic events in Mumbai, the American press – briefly – investigated the state of hotel security in the United States. After being interviewed by several major publications and reading the resultant stories, it quickly became apparent that we are not ready for increased security at our hotels.

OPEN CAMPUS, OPEN ARCHITECTURE

By the very nature of our business, our hotels are designed to be open and inviting places for the public's enjoyment. We welcome all to our properties and encourage them by offering multiple access points to the parking lot and hotel as well as multiple entrances to the building. Although most major U.S. hotel companies are controlling access to remote entrances via key cards, there is a trend to decrease security by substituting check-in kiosks for the traditional front desk experience. Thus, while we are controlling access to our buildings from the outside, we are actually decreasing our level of security inside the hotel. It takes very little imagination for a terrorist to check into a hotel, secure a guestroom key card, and then open a remote door for his compatriots. It is somewhat ironic to note that one major hotel company demands photo identification when you check-in at the front desk but also offers kiosks that bypass any human interaction at all during the check-in process.

LESSONS FROM MUMBAI

The terrorist attack in Mumbai was executed by a small band of well-trained and fanatically dedicated individuals who wreaked havoc in the city for over 60 hours. They attacked two popular hotels, among other targets, and succeeded in killing approximately 145 people during their assault. The Indian government was helpless to stop the attack and largely ineffective in hunting down the killers and freeing their hostages.

We in the United States would probably fare just a bit better. More than likely, we would be unable to prevent the initial terror attack, but with specialized police and military antiterrorist forces, we would eliminate the terrorists fairly quickly. We would respond with more speed and force than the Indians; we would not, however, escape serious casualties. The Mumbai group was armed with only small arms and grenades. One shudders to think of the carnage they could have generated if they had plastic explosives, much less chemical, biological or radiological weapons.

SECURITY IN U.S. HOTELS

As mentioned in several articles, the hotel industry is able and willing to provide the level of security the American public wants and, most importantly, will tolerate. Given the amount of grumbling one hears at any airport security screening point, we are not able to tolerate much interference. As previously mentioned, hotels are designed to be attractive gathering places that welcome the public in. To enhance security, the following changes would probably have to be made:

- Fence the circumference of the property with an 8- to 10-foot tall fence.

- Limit vehicle and pedestrian access to only one entrance to the property.
- Vehicles would have to be valet parked, some distance from the building.
- Install a state-of-the-art video and electronic surveillance system to monitor the entrance to the property, the perimeter fence, and all public spaces.
- Install metal detectors and explosive sniffers at the ONLY entrance to the building.
- Increase the numbers and the training of the security staff. Increase the security officers' wage to a level where this is a desired position and not a throwaway. Establish strict educational and physical requirements for these positions.
- Teach hotel staff how to recognize unusual behaviors and how to respond to them appropriately.
- Control access to guestroom floors by requiring key cards to enter stairwells from public spaces and to operate the elevators.
- Ensure all hotel employees are well trained in emergency response.

The likelihood of instituting these draconian measures is nil. What it comes down to is the guest must take responsibility for their own safety.

A REASONABLE RESPONSE TO TERRORISM IN THE U.S.

For the foreseeable future, the lodging industry will focus on traditional, non-intrusive security measures. These include:

- Security officers on duty 24/7.
- A color, digital, internet-capable, closed circuit television system is rapidly becoming the industry standard.
- Hotel employees – most particularly those with frequent guestroom floor access (Room Attendants, Security, Engineers, etc.) – are being trained in emergency response procedures.
- Requesting assistance from local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security for security evaluations.
- Educating the traveling public as to their role in ensuring their own security as well as that of their fellow travelers.
- The American Hotel & Lodging Association's Travelers' Safety Tips should be updated to include terrorism-related issues as well as fire and life safety.

When it is all said and done, the hotel industry stands ready to provide the level of security demanded by the American public. The public must first tell us what it wants and what it will tolerate.

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