

Technology's teething problems

High-tech hotels: are they a help or a hindrance for business travellers? **Yvonne Gordon** investigates

I lean over to the nightstand and push the button. The curtains open slowly, flooding the room with daylight. I am staying at Europe's most high-tech hotel, the Eccleston Square Hotel in London, which describes itself as an "ultra-high-tech urban cocoon".

Set in two renovated Georgian buildings on Eccleston Square, just a stone's throw from Victoria Station, the Eccleston Square Hotel is small, with 39 modestly-sized rooms.

Guests are promised the soundest night's sleep, as each bedroom has luxurious Hästens beds with massage function. However, what sets the hotel apart is the groundbreaking technology.

Every bedroom gets an iPad 2, so guests can use the touchscreen to order room service, housekeeping, wake-up calls – or simply to search for local information.

The lifts have TV screens with an array of channels to choose from. The idea is that you can select sound for the channel you want to play, but during my visit, the sound isn't yet available for all.

Each bedroom has a 46-inch LED TV on which you can watch 3D films. The bathroom has 'smart glass' walls, which turn opaque at the touch of a button and there is a TV in the steam-proof mirror. The shower has jets coming from all directions and the under-floor heating kicks in as soon as guests check in.

Unfortunately, not everything works as it is meant to. Pressing a button to open your bedroom curtains before you've even got out of bed in the morning is a great idea, but it pales a bit when you realise your alarm call is 22 minutes late.

Before my visit, I use an online form to find out about check-in times, but the answer never arrives.

I can't figure out how the lights work and there are no instructions. The iPad crashes a few times and I finally have to summon help to re-set it. From then on my relationship with the iPad is mixed.

I can check my email, doing away with the need for a laptop. I also have fun exploring the apps – checking flight info, watching recent TV shows on the BBC iPlayer and even looking up information about local attractions and restaurants.

I can order ice for the room from an extensive list of housekeeping services. I even manage to get on the guest list for the nightclub Whiskey Mist – all on the iPad.

MORE HIGH-TECH HOTELS

■ At the Aria Hotel in Las Vegas, rooms 'greet' guests as they enter; light fills the room, curtains part to show the view. Guests can control temperature, lighting, curtains and music, creating a personalised 'wake-up' call. arialasvegas.com

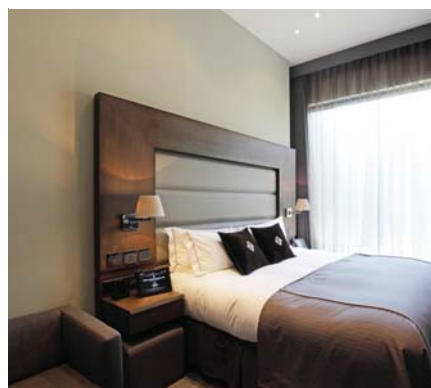
■ The Le Meridien Cyberport in Hong Kong has 'Smart Rooms' with wi-fi, iPod docking, internet radio and a special 'soothing corner', where an infusion of stimulating essential oils waft hang in the air. lemeridien-cyberport.com

■ The Nine Zero Hotel in Boston uses iris scan technology to allow guests to enter VIP suites. ninezero.com

■ In Spain's more budget-friendly High Tech Hoteles, all rooms have free wi-fi, iPod stations, free laptops, hydromassage showers and exercise bikes. hthoteles.com



The Eccleston Square Hotel in London



Top to bottom: bedroom with built-in TV, bathroom with ipod and dock

TRAVEL FILE

The Eccleston Square Hotel, from £250 per night. ecclestonsquarehotel.com, 0044-203-4891000 (reservations)

The hotel is 350 metres from Victoria Station from where the Gatwick Express departs every 15 minutes. See gatwickexpress.com.

Aer Lingus operates six flights a day between Dublin and London Gatwick with one-way fares starting from €19.99, including taxes. See aerlingus.com.

That said, I order two morning wake-up calls – an essential service for business traveller – but only one arrives and it's late. So while the high-tech hotel may have a lot to offer the business traveller, when automated services go wrong and gadgets malfunction, it can also be frustrating.

I wonder about the merits of simplicity. Reading a paper menu and making a quick call to order a sandwich, for example, rather than wasting time navigating various screens.

Or turning on lights with a straightforward switch, instead of fiddling around with a complicated control panel.

The Eccleston's hotel director, Olivia Byrne, points out that the 'high-tech' part of high-tech hotels is generally optional – you can ignore it if you wanted to, and take the manual route instead.

"We have a systems manager," says Byrne. "At the beginning it's always difficult when things don't work. As the months go by it gets better."

And ignoring the technology, Eccleston has plenty of other luxury factors to entice visitors.

The beds are amazingly comfortable, the bathroom is brimful of L'Occitane products, there is free wi-fi, and a particularly nice touch is the fairly priced minibar.



Lift showing different TV channels