Let the Imitation Sunshine In
Healthier living may be just a flip of a switch away.

Researchers are looking at how dialing up and down the brightness, color and richness of interior lighting can help regulate our circadian rhythms. These rhythms—the mental and behavioral changes that occur in response mostly to light cues over each 24-hour period—affect hormone releases, body temperature and the sleep-wake cycle, according to the National Institutes of Health. Studies have connected circadian-rhythm disruptions with obesity, depression and diabetes. Better lighting also lifts our moods and improves our quality of life, researchers say.

Lighting developers aren’t yet claiming health benefits on their product labels. But online, companies such as Philips NV and Cree Inc. point to studies (some their own) showing LED lights offer such benefits as helping doctors stay alert to perform exams and making it easier for patients to rest well and recover in a hospital. As more studies show the health impact of lighting, doctors might start to recommend “good lighting hygiene” for patients who, say, have trouble getting enough sleep at home, says Luc Schlangen, a senior scientist at Philips Lighting.

Unlike incandescent or fluorescent lights, LED lights’ materials and electronic components allow for finer adjustments of color, brightness and intensity. Some experimental homes are being equipped with lighting that automatically mimics sunlight’s changes from soft, warm amber in the morning to bright, cool white during the day and back to amber in the evening—which researchers say will help counteract the disruptive effect of conventional artificial lighting on our circadian rhythms.

What’s considered ideal lighting for different parts of a house depends greatly on a person’s habits, activities, age and even gender. But here is a general guide to what you can do with products commercially available now, based on input from Mr. Schlangen and Kelly Cunningham at the California Lighting Technology Center at the University of California, Davis:

**Living room:** Where people gather for activities such as watching TV or playing games, a brighter, whiter light is desirable (a “temperature” of 4,000 to 5,000 Kelvin; check an LED bulb’s label for its number).

Turning off electronic devices and switching your lighting to a softer, warmer color in the yellow and orange shades (2,700 Kelvin—yes, this “warmer” light has a lower temperature) two hours before bed will help the body get ready for sleep.

**Kitchen:** The quality of light for cooking is the major consideration for this room. Lights with high color-rendering ability help colors pop and bring out details of meat, vegetables and other ingredients. A color-rendering index, or CRI, higher than 90 provides rich coloring, and white light (4,000 to 5,000 Kelvin) also helps the food look good.

**Bathroom:** Rich color rendering is desirable when it comes to vanity mirror lighting for applying makeup or shaving. Lights with over 90 CRI are ideal. We need more light to see as we age, so a dimmable light will allow people in a household to adjust the brightness to their liking.

**Bedroom for adults:** Lights with a warmer glow (2,700 Kelvin, and dimmable) are ideal to minimize the disruption of melatonin, the hormone that makes us sleepy and is typically produced by the body when lighting in our environment dims.

**Bedroom for children:** A whiter light (above 3,000 Kelvin) will help wake children up in the morning, and an even brighter light can help them stay awake and do their homework after school. A warmer light (2,700 Kelvin) for use at night will help them get ready for sleep.

**Hallway:** Ultralow and warm lighting in the hallway and stairs helps people navigate without affecting their night vision, or our ability to see in low-light conditions. A white light often blinds people momentarily as they adjust their eyes to it, and that effect could cause people to step on or bump into things and fall if they are up during the night.


Farm-to-Table 2.0
Unforgettable farm-to-table experiences evolve for meeting groups

Whether or not you can do a full-scale farm-to-table experience, here are some expert tips to inject aspects of it into your next meeting.

**Let the Chefs Take Care of the Menu**
"At Blue Hill at Stone Barns, we give almost complete control over the menu to the chef so he can make the decision on what the local farmers have at the time. If you try to plan a menu six months to a year in advance, you’re just picking from a list and it’s hard to support local farmers with that kind of system. For people to think about the menu-design process in a different way is a step toward being really responsible with how we source our food." —Danielle Harrity, Blue Hill at Stone Barns

**Bring the Source to the Table**
"Reach out to local chefs who will turn you on to local farmers. When you ask them to join in on what you have planned, most of the time, people are quite happy to be involved. From farmers to sommeliers to winemakers, asking these people to be a part of your meeting adds that special touch. You could even invite a forager to speak about what they picked or a winemaker about how they made their wine. I’m sure they would be happy to share their passion with groups of people. Or maybe invite one of those local producers to talk about..."
Think Regionally
"When you're putting together your F&B, ask yourself where you want to go out and eat yourself, and where would you want to take people who visit to eat. How you can incorporate that regional aspect into your banquet menu or large meeting. You don't have to do everything; you can just start with one or two items that are regionally specific. Know that authentic, regionally focused menus have integrity and they can realign the perception of what your organization has to offer its meeting attendees." —Jeffery Payne, Wild Dunes Resort

Setting Matters
"If at all possible, try to have a beautiful setting—one that your attendees will remember. It's about having a sensory appreciation on many levels. It's not just about seeing the fruits, but about tasting them, feeling them, and smelling them, too. A true farm-to-table experience has to be a total package in that sense." —Tim Philen, Philen Pharmas

Quality Over Quantity
"Farm-to-table might be a little more expensive, but it's about better quality of food, not quantity. But people want to spend their money on that these days. So, maybe try cutting down on the amounts of animal protein that you serve; that will let you spend more on quality produce that's healthier for you and your attendees." —Paulette Lambert, California Health and Longevity Institute

Know What's In Season
"Plan in advance and try to find out what's local and in season where you are having your meeting. Some catering companies are not forcing clients to make choices up front. Don't be stuck with trying to decide the menu right away, but also be cognizant that things may change at the last minute." —Tracy Stuckrath, Thrive! Meetings & Events

Fresh. Responsibly sourced. Local. Organic. Farm-to-table. These are nearly ubiquitous terms when it comes to describing many of today's leading restaurants and F&B programs, but what exactly defines farm-to-table cuisine today? And how can you use farm-to-table F&B programs to create a meeting experience your attendees won't soon forget?

"Farm-to-table is really, more broadly speaking, about local food," says Kevin S. Murphy, Ph.D, certified executive chef, and chair of the hospitality services department of the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at the University of Central Florida. "It depends on where you are—for example, it's much easier to do farm-to-table in California than it might be in a place like Arkansas—and the definitions of 'local' can vary greatly.

Some of the best farm-to-table experiences, Murphy notes, are those that happen right on the farm, but they can also take place at local farmers' markets and wineries. "Being right there, where the food is being produced or the wine grapes are being grown, or where the cheese is being made—those actual visits, far and away, really bring home the meaning of the event that you're trying to do. But I know that's not always possible with budget constraints."

Farm-to-table cuisine is a movement that will only continue to grow, says Tracy Stuckrath, president and chief connecting officer of Thrive! Meetings & Events. Stuckrath, a meeting planner herself, specializes in consulting on F&B programs for events. "People want to learn how to make their food, and the role that food plays will be a lot more important in the coming years," she says.

Redefining Farm-to-Table
"In the last five years, farm-to-table has been something that the general public has talked about a lot more, especially with the 'foodies' movement we have today," says Danielle Harrity, director of events at Blue Hill at Stone Barns. "But that phrase doesn't have a good, solid definition anymore, and many people are just using it to use it," she explains. "There are many restaurants and food providers that occasionally buy from a local farmer, but is that really farm-to-table? It means different things to different people these days."

Located in upstate New York in Pocantico Hills, Blue Hill at Stone Barns opened in 2004 as a working farm, educational center, and world-class restaurant headed by Co-Owner and Executive Chef Dan Barber, who is often credited as a leading figure in the farm-to-table movement. At the restaurant, Harrity and her events team work closely with clients to create custom meetings that take advantage of the venue's rustic setting and its locally sourced cuisine.

"Attendees will participate in real things taking place on the farm," Harrity explains. "We don't make up activities; they don't know in advance what they'll be doing because the activities are based on what's happening on the farm at the time. It might be gathering produce from the greenhouse, paying a visit to the dairy farm, or helping the chefs in the kitchen."

Natalie McDonald, president and founding creator of Create NYC, a New York-based pharmaceutical advertising agency, recently brought a group of 20 to Blue Hill at Stone Barns for an off-site strategy-planning meeting that also included visits to a chicken coop to collect fresh eggs, a potato garden to pick potatoes and talk to the farmers, and the on-site kitchen to work on creating dishes with the chefs.

"Those activities really balanced out our day, and drove home the idea of learning how to balance our professional life beyond the typical work/life goals that we have," says McDonald. "Our purpose for the day melded nicely with the venue and their philosophy. Our day was focused on thriving and work/life balance and that kind of environment is conducive to it."

The concept of farm-to-table, McDonald adds, also helped convey these themes. "So many times in life you don't know where your food comes from and you're in such a hurry, you don't know the work that goes into it. But being able to see all of that in action was a great complement to what we were trying to achieve in our strategy and goal planning."

Not only that, but getting to see and participate in activities on the farm kept attendees engaged. "Our guests were extremely engaged throughout the meeting," she says. "Nothing was too deep, but it was really fun and engaging. The potato picking was optional, for example, but most of our guests got down into the dirt and started picking them."

Emphasizing Sustainability
Another aspect of a true farm-to-table experience has a lot
to do with sustainability and supporting the local community. At Fair Oaks Farms in Fair Oaks, IN, the entire operation is dedicated to sustainable farming and the education of visitors and groups.

"This farm is all about education and transparency of large-scale food production," explains Brent Brashier, Farmhouse Restaurant general manager at Fair Oaks Farms. "In the year 2050, there will be 10 billion people on Earth; right now, we've only got about 1% of the population producing food for the 99%. We have to look at how we're producing food to feed that many people, and to find a way to do that sustainably. "At Fair Oaks, sustainability is a major focus. "We want to show people that you can do large-scale food production and do it sustainably," says Brashier.

In July, Fair Oaks also opened a brand-new Farmhouse Restaurant and Conference Center with a banquet facility that can accommodate up to 280, and a restaurant that can hold up to 300. One of the first groups to meet in the new facility was, fittingly, the 85-person board of directors of U.S. Dairy. The pre-board outing for 85 dairy farmers from across the country was a huge hit with attendees, says Barbara O'Brien, president of the innovation center for U.S. Dairy. "It was a beautiful fit for our group," she says.

O'Brien's group began their day with a meeting in the new conference center, speaking to Mike and Sue McCloskey, the owners of Fair Oaks Farms. "They introduced themselves to us and talked about the whole business, and their philosophies about animal care and sustainability, and because the audience was dairy farmers, there was a huge connection there," she says. "Afterward, the group was split into two, each group visiting both the dairy and pig farms on site and eventually making their way back to the conference center for a lunch spread of fresh vegetables and greens, a carving station, and desserts that included ice cream (made fresh from the farm's own milk).

Having that entire farm-to-table experience, she adds, made a big impact on her attendees. "My observations, over the years, are that F&B can make or break a meeting—particularly with a board. It makes a lasting impression," says O'Brien. "Farm-to-table is still an emerging trend that different restaurants, hotels and conference centers are able to accommodate at varying levels; not everyone can deliver on that kind of experience. But it's important to see how it's executed, and this experience really delivered on it."

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TOP 7 HOTELS WHERE GUESTS FORAGE FOR THEIR FOOD

Numerous hotels are taking their guests out to play hunters looking for food outdoors. The amazing places to forage may include everything ranging from huge mountains for picking berries to lovely woodlands to pick blossoms. The guests are usually accompanied by local foragers who also assist the hotel chefs in the culinary activities.

**Sourwood Inn, Asheville, NC**

The hotel offers wonderful foraging excursions due to the wide range of wild ingredients of Asheville and the support of the local foraging company No Taste Like Home. The foraging package of Sourwood Inn offers a wild-food foraging outing lasting 3 hours. It includes accommodations for 2 nights for two. The package costs about $590. A copy of *Wild Mushrooms: A Taste of Enchantment* is presented to the guests. Wild food is quite easy to find here as Asheville features about 120 edible species.

**Sorrento Hotel, Seattle**

An Urban Foraging package for a maximum of 4 people is offered by the executive chef of the hotel, Dan Gilmore. The guests are taken out to forage the Seattle's Volunteer Park woodlands to collect chokecherries, thimbleberries, sugar maple blossoms, fennel blossoms, miners lettuce and Japanese knotweed. The ingredients are completed at the University District Farmers Market, and a lovely dinner is prepared using them at the Hunt Club Restaurant of the hotel.

**Otahuna Lodge, New Zealand**

The guests are taken out by Chef Jimmy McIntyre and the garden team to forage Porcinis between February and April, under the oak trees of the hotel that are 115 years old. The species was discovered by Chef Jimmy McIntyre when he picked up what he thought was a brown paper bag but turned out to be several mushrooms clumped together which were declared to be Porcinis by the mycology department. The Porcinis are also used in a cooking class of the hotel where these mushrooms are found in the potager garden of this Victorian mansion property and are showcased.

**Manoir Hovey, North Hatley, Quebec**

This hotel features a cheese cart including over 300 options from Quebec. There are also lovely foraging opportunities. A tasty menu of foraged food that includes sea plants from the St. Lawrence River's shore, puree made with beach rose hips and mils with sweet grass is provided by two local foragers, Jardin de la Mer and Gaspésie Sauvage. The sweet grass foie gras torchon is the signature foraged dish here. Others are plum sauce, candied pumpkin, gin macerated coronation grape and elderberry bread.

**Mount Nelson, Cape Town, South Africa**

The hotel has a wonderful 3-hour urban foraging experience on offer. The foraging of this colonial-style hotel is led by Charlie Standing, local hunter-gatherer. The guests are given an amazing round-the-city showcase making them cherish the lovely views along with a great variety of food prepared from ingredients bought from three places—the mountain forest, the Atlantic Coast and the slopes of Devils Peak. They can enjoy picking edible plants, nuts, mushrooms, seaweed, black mussels, giant sea snails and herbs such as Cape sorrel, fennel and nettle.

**Fat Hen, Cornwall, England**

The hotel not only delivers picturesque views of the sea but also amazing Gourmet Wild Food Weekends to its guests. Caroline Davey, local forager, accompanies the guests and the weekend includes meals and foraging trips. The three
meals are served as well as prepared in the granite goat barn. Amazing dishes and desserts are served, some of them being pigeon, nettle ravioli, squirrel, rock samphire fritti, Japanese seaweed and many more.

Il Salvatino, Tuscany, Italy

The foraging in Tuscany grows remarkably in the autumn which brings the truffle season and brightly colored yellow-orange leaves. This hotel located in the Tuscan hills offers a package “Florentine Food for Thoughts” to its guests where they are taken for a wonderful truffle hunt. The hotel features a lovely Italian garden which has been installed in a villa from the 15th century displaying frescoes dating back in time.

http://www.tourism-review.com/best-7-hotels-for-foraging-news4283

Scientists test electric power plant mounted on vehicle’s roof

What if you could power your car by bolting an energy-storing, flapping device to your roof? That’s not likely to happen any time soon. But researchers in South Korea have demonstrated a prototype that might be capable of recharging your smartphone or tablet. They explain how it works in a report published in the journal Nature Communications.

The researchers dubbed their contraption a “flutter-driven triboelectric generator,” or FTEG for short. It consists of a flexible woven “flag” coated in a thin layer of gold and a stiff plate covered with a Teflon-like material. When the flag flutters in the wind and hits the plate, “the two structures become oppositely charged,” according to the study. Then, when the flag and plate separate, the resulting “electronic potential difference” can send electrons to an external circuit.

This simple mechanism converts the kinetic energy of the wind into potential energy in the form of electricity, according to the Korean team. After a series of lab tests to optimize their design, the engineers stacked several of these FTEG contraptions and mounted them to the roof of a sedan. With the car cruising along at 70 kilometers per hour (about 45 mph), the apparatus was able to charge a 1,000-microfarad capacity to 30 volts in 25 minutes, the researchers reported. As more people find themselves using more wireless devices, demand for electricity on the go is sure to grow, the researchers wrote. FTEGs could be a promising solution to this impending power crunch, they added.


Plastic Bag Bans

Greens would like the federal government to follow California’s lead in banning plastic bags.

What’s the latest on efforts to ban plastic bags? How many US locales have instituted some kind of ban, and have these initiatives made a dent in the amount of plastic litter? —Melinda Clarke, New York, NY

California made big news recently when it announced the first statewide ban on plastic shopping bags set to kick in during the middle of 2015. Beginning in July, large grocery stores, pharmacies and other food retailers in the Golden State will no longer be able to send shoppers home with plastic bags, while convenience markets, liquor stores and other small food retailers will join the ranks a year later.

Back in 2007, San Francisco became the first US municipality to ban plastic shopping bags. In intervening years upwards of 132 other cities and counties in 18 states and the District of Columbia instituted similar measures. Of course, Americans are late to the party when it comes to banning plastic bags: The European Union, China, India and dozens of other nations already have plastic bag bans or taxes in place.

But the trend here toward banning plastic shopping bags comes in the wake of new findings regarding the extent and harm of plastic in our environment. Since plastic isn’t biodegradable, it ends up either in landfills or as litter on the landscape and in waterways and the ocean. Plastic can take hundreds of years to decompose and releases toxins into the soil and water in the process.

Littered plastic is also a huge problem for the health of wildlife, as many animals ingest it thinking it is food and can have problems thereafter breathing and digesting. The nonprofit Worldwatch Institute reports that at least 267 species of marine wildlife are known to have suffered from entanglement or ingestion of marine debris, most of which is composed of plastic; tens of thousands of whales, birds, seals and turtles die every year from contact with ocean-borne plastic bags. A recent European Commission study on the impact of litter on North Sea wildlife found that some 90% of the birds examined had plastic in their stomachs.

Another reason for banning plastic bags is their fossil fuel burden. Plastic is not only made from petroleum—producing it typically requires a lot of fossil-fuel-derived energy. The fact that Americans throw away some 100 billion plastic grocery bags each year means we are drilling for and importing millions of barrels worth of oil and natural gas for a convenient way to carry home a few groceries.

It’s hard to measure the impact of pre-existing plastic bag bans, but some initial findings look promising. A plastic bag tax levied in Ireland in 2002 has reportedly led to a 95% reduction in plastic bag litter there. And a study by San Jose, CA found that a 2011 ban instituted there has led to plastic litter reduction of “approximately 89% in the storm drain system, 60% in the creeks and rivers, and 59% in city streets and neighborhoods.”

Environmental groups continue to push for more plastic bag bans. “As US natural gas production has surged and prices have fallen, the plastics industry is looking to ramp up domestic production,” reports the Earth Policy Institute. “Yet using this fossil fuel endowment to make something so short-lived, which can blow away at the slightest breeze and pollutes indefinetely, is illogical—particularly when there is a ready alternative: the reusable bag.”

See more at http://www.emagazine.com/earth-talk/plastic-bag-bans#sthash.2U0tj0JS.dpuf

Scheer, Roddy and Doug Moss, "Greens would like the federal government to follow California’s lead in banning plastic bags." October 12, 2014, http://www.emagazine.com/earth-talk/plastic-bag-bans
Putting a LID on Harmful Stormwater Runoff

Low-impact development (LID) minimizes pavement and maximizes rainwater infiltration, filtering out pollution and preventing erosion.

You may not think of parking lots and suburban lawns as sources of pollution, but when it rains, they might as well be Superfund sites: petrochemicals, heavy metals and toxic levels of nitrogen and phosphorous from fertilizer can enter nearby waterways at high concentrations, harming local ecosystems. During heavy storms, runoff from roofs, impervious pavement and compacted soil can also cause erosion and flash floods and can sweep dangerous levels of silt—or even human waste and concomitant pathogens—into waterways.

Green infrastructure and other strategies related to low-impact development (LID) aim to prevent all these detrimental effects of runoff, whether during a light rain or a heavy storm. Integrated into landscape architecture to mimic natural hydrology, green infrastructure decreases runoff quantity and improves rainwater quality by performing several interrelated functions.

This constructed wetland in Lanxmeer, a green district in the Netherlands, is an example of low-impact development.

Infiltration—Rather than sheeting off into streams or being drained into artificial detention ponds for near-immediate release, rainwater enters porous soil—often specially engineered for the purpose—eventually contributing to groundwater recharge. Typically, the porous soil supports plant growth, and the plants perform other functions; permeable pavement without plantings is an alternative way to encourage infiltration.

Retention—A conventional retention pond (a permanent artificial water body that receives stormwater) or detention pond (a place where stormwater is held for a few hours before release, primarily to prevent flooding) is not designed to treat rainwater or replenish groundwater. In contrast, a LID landscape stores rainwater while microbes in the soil filter out excess nutrients, heavy metals and other pollutants. Eventually, the clean water either trickles into groundwater or evaporates or transpires safely (without ponding, which can provide a breeding ground for mosquitos).

Evapotranspiration—Water evaporation from wet soil and transpiration from plants (release of water through leaves after it's been drawn up through roots and used to aid photosynthesis and other plant functions) return water to the atmosphere, continuing the water cycle. With the right plantings, transpiration may provide important “overflow” control; a series of heavy rainfalls can stress any management system, but research from Villanova University suggests that plants may compensate for saturated soil in a well-designed system by transpiring the excess water.

When designing for LID, project teams perform a hydrologic analysis, attempting to calculate and then replicate pre-development hydrology—infiltration, evapotranspiration, and groundwater discharge rates as well as runoff rate and volume—for the vast majority of rainfall events. Strategies for mimicking natural hydrology are site-specific and are ideally developed through an integrative design process where soils and plantings play an integral role in building and site performance rather than a purely ornamental one.

Some of the strategies employed in LID include constructed wetlands, rain gardens, bioswales, tree-planting boxes, permeable pavement and green roofs. Rainwater harvesting is also considered a green-infrastructure strategy, though it does not mimic natural hydrology the way some of the other systems do.

In addition to preserving biodiversity and protecting public health, many LID strategies are less expensive to implement and maintain than conventional stormwater management infrastructure.


Silence is the latest trend in luxury resorts

People will pay a lot of money for some peace and quiet.

I am what might politely be called sensitive to noise. When I was growing up, the sound of Garrison Keillor’s muffled, nasal bass coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom from the kitchen just before dinner time drove me crazy; I would pound on the floor and plead with my parents to turn it down. Today I sleep with earplugs and keep extra sets in my office and in my handbag for emergency backup quiet. I am the one on the subway giving the evil eye to anyone talking too loudly, pushing notes under the doors of upstairs neighbors about their music habits, and skulking around the office trying to identify the source of the speakerphone conference call. I would set up residence in an Amtrak Quiet Car if they’d let me. It’s not overstating things to say that silence is my drug of choice.

So last year, when I decided to splurge on a five-day vacation after a busy work stretch, my destination of choice was Parrot Cay by COMO, a tranquil, Zen-like luxury resort in the Caribbean’s Turks and Caicos Islands. It’s a place that had long been on my bucket list, and when my beau and I arrived, I knew why. The place is on its own island, so you take a speedboat to get there, then drive three miles through mangrove trees, and even after you arrive you hardly see or hear anyone. (We were also traveling in May, an off-peak time of year and a favored month for the clamor-averse.) There’s not much to do at Parrot Cay—beach, yoga, meditation classes—and our days were simple, quiet and far removed from our day-to-day jobs in New York. Even our nights were quiet and still—there’s none of that pressure to “go into town” when town is a 40-minute boat ride away. All of this helped time pass more slowly than it might have elsewhere. On our last night, a pair of complimentary T-shirts arrived in our room adorned with the resort’s slogan for the season: “Silence is the new luxury.” I almost teared up. This hotel and I, we were one.

Turns out it’s not just me, and it’s not just Parrot Cay. The latest trend in luxury travel doesn’t involve thread count or a seaweed-mud wrap. It’s silence. Hotels from luxury resorts to business-travel chains are marketing things like noise-free zones, triple-paned glass, soundproof walls, and serene settings where the whole sell is the ability to hear a pin drop.
Some of this is related to the "mindfulness" trend taking the world by storm—Zen gardens and meditation rooms are de rigueur at many places, and Eat, Pray, Love–style silent retreats are a dime a dozen. It also takes its root in the desire to disconnect from our devices; more and more hotels now offer some kind of "digital detox" package. But a growing number of destinations are promoting the absence of noise not as part of a broader spiritual message, but as a virtue in itself.

Consider: The Beverly Hills Hotel is finishing a three-year restoration that paid particular attention to noise reduction; there are now double layers of drywall between rooms, extra padding underneath carpets, door seals that drop down and help reduce "noise transfer," and TVs that are programmed so that they can't exceed a maximum volume.

At Chewton Glen, a luxury getaway in Hampshire, England, guests can stay in treehouses at the edge of a forest; the doors have a concealed hatch through which staff can deliver room service without making a sound. The Fairmont Vancouver Airport Hotel offers the chain's first "Quiet Zone," a floor designed for travelers coming in from long flights or between layovers. Declared a noise-free zone, rooms have triple-paned, soundproof windows; the floor has no bellmen, no housekeeping and no room service from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The trend makes sense for a number of reasons. Noise complaints regularly top hotel guest satisfaction surveys, while our over-wired world has us hooked up and plugged in 24/7—we all need a little stillness to sit and catch our breath. Plus, let's face it, the world has gotten a lot more obnoxious. Who wouldn't want to escape the loud-talking group of teenagers next to you at your favorite restaurant, or the guy strutting around the airport gate holding a hands-free conference call that could pass for performance art if it weren't so annoying?

One of the world's ultimate quiet zones, the aforementioned Amtrak Quiet Car, was actually cooked up by a group of commuters who persuaded their conductor to try out dedicating an entire car as noise-free. It caught fire; Amtrak soon expanded it, and the Quiet Car now holds cultlike status among regular riders.

At Parrot Cay, the “Silence is the new luxury” line actually came from a guest, says Crawford Sherman, regional director of COMO Hotels and Resorts, Parrot Cay’s parent. But he says it’s a big part of the appeal. Silence plays a role in many of the company’s properties; Sherman even draws a distinction between the mountain silence at the COMO Shambhala Estate in Bali, and Parrot Cay’s silence, which he maintains is more of an ocean silence.

Several months after my stay at Parrot Cay, I took a trip to another noise-free refuge, the Mayflower Grace, a 30-room hotel and spa in Washington, CT. At the Mayflower, silence is not marketed per se, but it’s a main draw for the stressed-out New Yorkers who go there; the relaxation room at its spa, where “inside voices” are encouraged, is an ethereal sanctuary; there’s also a labyrinth maze for taking contemplative walks and a Shakespeare garden.

The hotel’s head of marketing, Allison Kline, says that while there’s no official policy on noise, guests pick up on the cues of their surroundings; the spa naturally encourages quiet, but not so much at the Tap Room in the main lodge, a cozy pub and piano bar. “Certainly in the Tap Room, people will get louder, as expected,” says Kline. Indeed they did, the night my mom and I enjoyed a festive dinner there chatting it up with the locals. Silence is golden, yes, but every now and then there’s nothing wrong in balancing it with a good, old-fashioned raucous pub.

The implementation of the bracelet is the brainchild of the Grand Residences Riviera Cancun’s general manager, hospitality veteran Carlo Bicaci, who said the hotel has already begun offering the high-tech keys to guests and will give them to 100% of its guests soon. The bracelets are produced by a company called Salto; while a typical keycard costs around $1, this kind of key can cost a hotel around $7. But for luxury properties in a hyper-competitive marketplace, offering the ease of an all-inclusive resort, even in a high-end luxury property, can more than make up the difference. It also means eliminating the need for cash in hotel transactions.

The keys will even come in several different colors—indeed, it’s not hard to imagine hotels one day turning these keys into their own branded style statements. And it’s not hard to conceive of another development: eventually turning hotel keys into smart watches or bracelets, including information on guests, from containing guests' preferences to integrating social media. Could a hotel room key one day be a guest’s personal concierge?

Don’t be fooled by appearances. Planes are a breeding ground for germs. If you thought using the bathrooms on a plane was a tad risky, you'll be shocked at these latest findings. The Today Show released its first of three reports exposing the dirty truth about what germs are lurking on planes and in
airports. Taking three different flights across the country, each on a different major airline, their team gathered samples from various stages of the journey including check-in, armrests and toilets with some concerning results.

The first shock—security screening. Tests of two bins used to collect shoes, bags and other personal belongings that go through the x-ray machine revealed the presence of dangerous bacteria. One bin was found to have fecal matter at levels high enough to make people sick.

How on Earth did fecal matter end up on these bins? Dr. Robert Glatter, an emergency doctor at New York’s Lenox Hill Hospital told the show: “We’re talking about skin or soft-tissue infections, which can potentially lead to overwhelming infections in your bloodstream.” But that’s just the beginning. Once on the plane, the germ situation isn’t any more comforting. Crumbs on the aisle floors and mysterious stains on the seats had the team questioning how thorough the cleaners were between flights.

The most shocking find was the levels of bacteria found on the tray tables. Covered in germs, one flight attendant recalled seeing them being used as change tables for babies’ nappies.

The humble tray table is a haven for bacteria. While all the armrests came back negative, tests on the seat belts were filthy including one that showed the presence of “human bacteroides.” “These are bacteria that live in our gut and our intestines. These are dangerous bacteria that cause serious infections,” said Glatter.

Another study conducted by Auburn University found that harmful and potentially deadly bacteria like MRSA and E. coli survive for days on arm rests, toilet flush handles, tray tables, window shades, seats and seat pockets. So how can you prevent picking up one of these dreaded bugs on a plane? Carry sanitizer and wipe down your tray table before use, wash your hands frequently, don’t walk barefoot on the carpet and check the back seat pocket before use for any nasty leftovers from the previous flight.

Seatbelts are filthy. Wipe those belts and buckles down before use.

In an effort to garner free publicity from guests and to enhance their stays, some hotels now give official advice on where to take the best selfies and have contests enticing guests to post their best selfies and win a free stay.

The Mandarin Oriental Paris offers the Selfies in Paris package, which includes a Mercedes Classe E with driver at the guests’ disposal for three hours, free Wi-Fi in the car and hotel room, and a list of the best selfie spots in Paris. Guests can also win a free one-night stay by tagging the hotel in selfies that they post to social media sites.

If this sounds overly done, it’s also worth noting the Hotel Grand Bretagne in Athens has a designated selfie spot on its rooftop, positioned so that guests hopefully get the perfect photo with the Acropolis in the background.

In the US, hotels coast to coast have similar selfie contests and packages. The Lansdowne Resort in Leesburg, VA, is giving away more than $15,000 in prizes and vacations for guests who post selfies of their stay, and Hotel Modera in Portland, OR, held its contest in May.

The 1888 hotel in Sydney, Australia, lets guests take selfies in the lobby, and the images immediately show up on screens at the check-in desks once tagged and uploaded to Instagram. Tourists often go to great lengths to capture the perfect selfie moment, while sometimes putting themselves in danger. A Polish couple posing for a selfie was tragically killed in Portugal after falling off a cliff in Cabo da Roca, leaving behind their two children who were vacationing with them.


15 Hotel Room Grievances
Here are the top things that can upset guests.

A hotel’s guestroom is the core of the hospitality experience and so it deserves your special attention to get everything just right. There are many small things that can turn a guest off, but are often overlooked for one reason or another. Call this my pet peeve list—15 items to think about, and I’m sure you can think of plenty more.

1. Poor WiFi signal. I am differentiating this point from the set up and cost. What I am referring to is insufficient bandwidth to operate the basics of the business: loading the internet and downloading basic files (let alone movies or anything of that magnitude).

2. Pay for WiFi. Give me a break. I’m paying $550 per night for the room and now you want another $13.95 for WiFi? What’s wrong with this picture? I pay five bucks for a coffee at Starbucks and get all the WiFi I need (which, by the way, is where your consumers are going instead of your restaurant). Also, don’t you ever notice that the economy segment hotels seem to have free WiFi while the luxury products do not?

3. In-room coffee that’s in unopenable packets. Unfortunately, we airline travelers no longer carry scissors. So how do we open these space-proof foil packs? I once
phoned down to the front desk to ask a bellman to bring up a pair.

4. **Shampoo amenities not large enough for two users.** If my wife is with me, we need to execute our own shampoo-rationing plan. Don’t you think that someone could increase the size in anticipation of two designated occupants?

5. **Small water bottles that are not free.** Single-serve water bottles cost just a few cents each, maybe at most 25-35 cents from a wholesaler. Include a few and price your room up by just a buck.

6. **A larger bottle of water with a $5.95 ‘warning’ neck tag.** Come on now. Does that water bottle really dictate that price? Better to have no large water bottles than to feature a price incongruity that might upset guests.

7. **Too many tent cards.** I arrive in the room and I’m bombarded with brochures telling me about the great chef, a promotional food offer somewhere in the hotel or the drink specials. Yet, surprisingly, these offers are not available for room service.

8. **Complex lighting controls.** Some even require putting the glasses back on to figure out how to use them. Worse is trying to turn off the lights to get a night’s sleep, and you can’t figure out how to shut off that one hallway light that cannot be accessed from bedside.

9. **TVs that cannot be seen easily from the bed.** I have been in rooms where the TV is opposite the bed, but the room is so large that you are out of remote control range. And if the remote control can’t see the TV, imagine how you, the viewer, can see it? I have also been in rooms where the TV has to be rotated to be viewed from the bed, and in doing so the remote no longer functions.

10. **Noisy AC units.** In fact, some are so noisy that when the compressor clicks on, it might wake those in the next room. Sorry, but I expect a quiet room, especially in the luxury class. This one may require a heavy upgrade cost, but for guest satisfaction, it is a must.

11. **Drapes that don’t fully block sunlight.** Often, black-out drapes just aren’t sized properly, leaving gaps. Amazing how sunlight dances through!

12. **Quirky alarm clocks.** We’re talking about the ones that do not set easily or those tied into a radio and not a buzzer. I’ve given up on this one and just use my iPhone.

13. **Lack of accessible outlets for rechargers.** This one is especially bad when it comes to bedside rechargers. How do you plug your phone in to recharge it and still have it handy by being within reach of the bed? I realize that most guestrooms were configured and built well before the advent of smartphones, but this might crop up as a pesky problem for your guests.

14. **Soap packaged in plastic shrink-wrap.** You know what I’m talking about: the packaging that requires real effort to remove. You need long finger nails and lots of patience (and your glasses on). Test a random batch from your supplier. If you can’t open it easily, replace the batch or get a new vendor!

15. **Bathrooms with poor lighting.** This one tops the list as my wife’s biggest complaint. It’s added in here as she definitely had a few things to say about hotel rooms she will never visit again (along with those that do not have make-up mirrors).

Now, here is my recommendation with all these minor points: spend a night at your property and see if anything on this list comes up. Each one might be the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. Sooner or later, one of these will be the deciding factor for guest satisfaction, positive online reviews and return visits. Most are easy fixes, so do something about it.

**GREEN IDEA!**

Especially when using dark lipsticks, it’s a good idea to put lip balm on your lips first. It will protect your lips as well as help keep your lipstick on longer.

**FINAL WORDS . . .**

Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.

Maria Robinson, American writer