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Travel

Cranky Consumer

Crashing at Extended-Stay Hotels

We Hit the Road,
Judging Staffs
To Breakfast Buffets
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Why stay in a hotel when you can park yourself in a place that feels like home?

For more than two decades, that's been the pitch behind extended-stay lodgings, which are really more like studio apartments with real kitchens and living spaces than traditional hotels. Most also offer amenities that go beyond a newspaper at the door: Think breakfast buffets and evening "socials."

The concept has proved to be highly popular -- and highly profitable. That's because extended-stay hotels appeal primarily to business travelers, which means they're less affected by the economic downturns that make leisure travel a luxury. And that's why many hotel chains are investing heavily in the category -- and in some cases, redefining it as well.



Residence Inn by Marriott brand's new Infusion living-room area.

Hilton Hotels Corp. plans to expand its Homewood Suites by Hilton brand from 242 locations to nearly 400. The Global Hyatt Corp. took over the Summerfield Suites chain in 2006 and has added seven locations to the existing 21. And category leader Marriott International Inc., whose Residence Inn by Marriott brand has more than 500 locations world-wide (and 168 more are to open by 2010), recently started rolling out its Infusion suites, designed to showcase "contemporary decor and finishes that reflect the comforts and luxuries of a modern

American home."

Plus, there are significant newcomers. In 2006, Korman Communities Inc. unveiled [AKA](#), a chain that aims to bring urban sophistication to the extended-stay concept; its

seven locations are spread throughout New York, Philadelphia and metro Washington. And earlier this summer, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. opened its first Element, touted as a "green" extended-stay brand, in Lexington, Mass.

To see if these brands delivered on their promises of a homey experience, our family of four took a 300-mile, eight-day road trip through five states, stopping at a different extended-stay hotel almost every night. (Besides their appeal to business travelers, extended-stays also are popular with families.) We judged everything from the comfort of the bed linens to the choices at the breakfast spread.

Of course, that's provided we could make it to breakfast. At the Residence Inn by Marriott Shelton Fairfield County, in Shelton, Conn., that became an issue when our reservation was canceled on less than two days notice. The general manager explained that the hotel had to unexpectedly host guests forced to leave their homes because of a fire. We were sympathetic, but put off by his choice of alternative arrangements -- a nearby Marriott property that wasn't an extended-stay. That left us with having to settle for a Residence Inn in Meriden, Conn. -- some 30 miles away.

And the Meriden accommodations, even after we were given a free upgrade to a two-bedroom suite (we paid \$164 a night, the one-bedroom rate) didn't make up for our frustrations. This was a property in sore need of renovation, from the hole-ridden curtains to a bathroom door that wouldn't properly lock. The staff also wasn't very responsive to our complaint about the shabby conditions. Still, we did make it to breakfast -- a hearty spread of everything from eggs to fresh fruit.

At the Hyatt Summerfield Suites Bridgewater, in Bridgewater, N.J., it was the evening spread that caught our attention. This was more a dinner buffet than a happy hour's worth of light bites, with offerings that included cold cuts, salad, soup and a make-your-own nachos station. The staff contributed to the festive mood, rushing to collect plates and maintaining a join-the-party attitude. Our two-bedroom suite (\$258 a night) didn't disappoint, with its slightly upscale look and smart amenities, including a flat-panel television in the living room. Our minor quibbles: The space in the room was somewhat tight, and the three-floor hotel lacks elevators (we were successfully able to request a first-floor room.)

The Homewood Suites by Hilton Providence-Warwick in Warwick, R.I. , delivered the most friendly service. The staff was quick to go out of their way to handle just about any request: When we had problems using the fax machine in the otherwise large and highly functional business center, an employee took it upon herself to do the faxing from the hotel's own machine -- at no charge. Breakfast and evening socials were more noteworthy



A bedroom/bath of a guest room in Starwood's Element Lexington, an eco-minded hotel.

for their sheer conviviality than for the quality of food. Too bad, however, the one-bedroom suite (\$141.55 a night), didn't rise above the level of nondescript, looking more generically corporate than stylish.

It was the newer chains that best seized on the idea of extended-stay with a designer's vision. At the AKA Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, that meant a hotel with a hipster attitude, from the less-is-more aesthetic of the reception area to the rooms that boast Egyptian cotton linens in the bedroom and stainless-steel kitchen appliances. However, the AKA -- located in the heart of the city -- was the most expensive of the hotels we visited (\$385 a night for a one-bedroom suite). Then again, that suite was nearly twice as large -- at 980 square feet -- than any other hotel room we stayed in during our trip. Staff didn't neglect the details, from assisting with getting the luggage into the car to asking about our vacation plans. The surprising negative: A skimpy continental-style breakfast, served in a fairly small room that didn't encourage much in the way of socializing.

With Starwood's Element Lexington, style and eco-minded functionality went hand in hand. With an almost Zen-like look, the hotel is designed to blend in with its bucolic mountain setting. It might seem a bit insufferable, but the hotel's "eco-chic" attitude and array of amenities also translates into an extraordinarily comfortable experience. We loved the oversized rain showerheads, the emphasis on natural light, even the hotel mini-mart stocked with gourmet goodies, like a mini Whole Foods. And instead of another buffet-line plate of bacon and scrambled eggs, we enjoyed a healthy morning wrap made with egg whites.

What didn't measure up? In some instances, the staff: They were going through lots of opening-season jitters. We also cut ourselves -- twice! -- on door panels with a very sharp edge. (We're told they've since been replaced.) But such problems notwithstanding, the best measure of Element's appeal might be that when our time was nearing an end, we opted to extend our stay, adding another day. In other words, we felt at home.