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On the Spot: Sound advice for avoiding hotel noise

A little research can save you from having the jarring experience that all but ruined this reader's recent stay in Dublin.



By Catharine Hamm
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Question: On a trip to Ireland we stayed at a hotel in Dublin that was advertised as "a tranquil retreat in the heart of the city center." It was — until about 2 a.m., when people began leaving the nightclub/pub across the street. There were fights, yelling, honking horns, beer bottles breaking — and this was a Wednesday night.

After another night like this, we decided to leave, but the hotel would not refund our money.

Candy Butler, Lake Arrowhead

Answer: Good night! Who knew booking a hotel room would require so much research? But it does, noise experts said.

First, though, a traveler's best tool may be TripAdvisor, whose reviewers sometimes cited the same middle-of-the-night noise that disrupted Butler's rest. The reviews seemed to depend on whether the room faced the street with the pub (which, by the way, has its own Facebook page with 11,000 followers, which suggests danger, Will Robinson).

Exterior ruckus is one of four kinds of noise that can wreck a hotel experience, said Tom Ito, a hotel design practice leader on the hospitality team of Gensler, a global architecture firm. (The others: room-to-room racket, air conditioning and heating units, and plumbing.)

Exterior noise is the most difficult to deal with, Ito said, because it's transient. "It comes and it goes.... It only happens when the band is playing [for one example]. Those are the [noises] that are the most difficult to mitigate."

Some hotels, he noted, use "masking," which could be a hum from a heating or cooling unit. "Sometimes noise isn't bad. Sometimes a small noise from a unit that has a low sound actually has a benefit ... and has a soothing ability," Ito said.

His solution? "I ask very simply for a quiet room," he said. "If it's on the exterior facing a busy street, I want to be on a courtyard. I don't want to be next to the elevator core or close to a nightclub."

Los Angeles Times

Other hazards to watch out for? Ray Nugent, supervisory consultant in noise and vibration control at Acentech, a multidisciplinary acoustics, audiovisual systems design and vibration consulting firm with offices in Westlake Village, said in an e-mail: "If the hotel is next to an airport, double-paned windows are a must.

"Structures may have other acoustical concerns that also need to be addressed. Those include doors and openings to the exterior that are poorly sealed, large fireplaces that are openings to overhead aircraft noise, poorly maintained facades that have cracks or gaps that reduce the acoustical integrity of the surface, vents in the attic or crawl space that provide a path for noise to enter into the living spaces, etc."

To that list, Susan Cronin, vice president of operations for the Crescent Hotel Group, which deals with historic properties, said, in an e-mail: "Stay away from housekeeping closets, laundry rooms, ice machines and HVAC equipment (that a/c compressor on the roof can be a killer)." She recommended asking the reservationist whether renovations for soundproofing had been done and noted, "End-of-hall locations guarantee less foot traffic (and bell carts, housekeeping carts, luggage)."

Better get a good night's sleep before tackling the next hotel reservation. Besides negotiating the rate, you'll need to make sure your synapses are firing properly before you book that little piece of hotel heaven.