



THE INSIDER

## The Ratings Game

By Christopher Elliott

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As any frequent traveler already knows, there's no consistency among American hotel ratings. But garden-variety guests like you or me could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. We believe a star is a star is a star. It's not.

"There are significant differences between hotel ratings systems," says Bill Carroll, a senior lecturer at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. "Stars and diamonds are in the eye of the beholder."

And in the eyes of ratings organizations. For example, according to the Forbes Travel Guide (formerly Mobil), a three-star property should offer "distinguishing style and ambience," while three-diamond digs, according to AAA, must "be multifaceted with a distinguished style, including marked upgrades in the quality of physical attributes, amenities, and level of comfort provided." Hotwire.com, which has its own star ratings, gives three stars to any "mid-range" hotel with "a relaxed and inviting environment." Sound vague? It is.

This doesn't just mean you'll have to forgo a hair dryer or a full-service restaurant at the next hotel you select because four stars in your book didn't mean four stars to the rating company. Inflated designations can translate into costlier hotel rooms, which means you could be getting ripped off, too.

"Opaque" websites—online agencies that discount hotel rooms but don't reveal the name of the property until you've booked—may be playing it fast and loose with the stars. The sites have logged a flood of complaints for overrating rooms, according to experts such as Carroll. And while the damage seems relatively minor—customers had to pay only a few dollars more per night for accommodations—the practice could dent your wallet over a week's stay. More notably, it can add millions of dollars to an online travel agency's coffers over time.

Alisia Bergsman recently clicked on Hotwire to snag what was described as four-star accommodations in Charleston, S.C. Hotwire's bookings are nonrefundable, so there's no turning back once you surrender your credit card information. She landed a room at the Charleston Marriott. After some post-purchase sleuthing, she discovered that AAA gave the hotel only three diamonds while Expedia awarded it just three and a half stars. "It seemed to be out of sync with other ratings," she says. Like virtually all U.S.-based ratings, Hotwire uses its own proprietary system. It divines its stars from an average rating from "other top travel sites" and customer feedback.

Customers have had similar experiences at Priceline, another major opaque booking site. Eric Maur booked a room at a five-star hotel through Priceline in Las Vegas last year. He found himself checking into the Trump International Hotel, which was given four stars by AAA and three by Forbes. He appealed to Priceline, which maintained the rating was correct.

I've handled dozens of these complaints, and spoken with representatives of both major opaque sites about their ratings, and all insist there's no funny business at work. The stars, they say, are theirs and can't be compared with anyone else's.

And therein lies the issue. Any rating organization or online agency can arbitrarily award hotels stars (or take them away). There's no standard comparable to Europe's broadly accepted, quasi-official hotel and restaurant rating system.

According to Carroll, the inconsistency creates a gap between guest expectation and reality. He's been involved with several lawsuits brought against opaque sites by guests who thought they were being shorted by a star.

There's a clear problem. "The traditional star rating system for hotels in the United States is outdated," says Glenn Haussman, editor in chief of the Hotel Interactive Network, a website for the hotel trade. The solution, however, is less clear. Should we have a model based on the widely accepted system used by HOTREC, a partnership of hotel associations in much of Europe, offering "harmonized" hotel classification with common criteria? A three-star hotel in Austria, for example, will have the same basic amenities as one in the Netherlands, Sweden, or the Baltic countries. Those would include a reception with a bilingual English and local-language staff, in-room telephone and Internet (or online access in a public area). Other countries, notably Britain and France, have similar ratings sanctioned by tourism organizations.

The benefits to guests of synchronizing some of the ratings would be immediate, because travelers would be enlightened. They'd know what they'd get for every star. Hotels might benefit too, and not just because they'd have happier guests. Being a five-star property would actually mean something (no asterisks, no questionable diamonds). While appealing in many ways, a similar system would demand agreement of the large and not always agreeable American hotel industry with its entrepreneurial DNA that resists regulation.

Frankly, it's not very likely. While I suspect the opaque ratings systems may get the attention of a court before long, American hotel guests are probably stuck with what they have—a confusing, diverse galaxy of ratings. We need to make our peace with it and learn to navigate it. In conversations with hotel experts and guests, one piece of advice pops up predictably: There's no substitute for your own research.

What does it all mean? Well, to me it means booking a place with more of the amenities I value. Is there a pool? That's worth at least a star, according to my two sons. (Add a half star if there's a slide.) Disney Channel? My five-year-old daughter gives that property a thumbs-up. A fast, free, in-room wireless Internet connection? Another star from the always-on parents. And any hotel with an in-room espresso maker automatically gets five stars in my book. Point is, the only rating system that really matters at the end of the day is yours.

Basing your hotel booking decision on a single star or diamond rating is absurd, unless maybe you're in Europe, and even then, you'll want to consult some user-generated reviews or ask a travel agent for advice. Some of the first globe-trotters, the ancient seafarers who used the stars to find their way home, didn't use a single star to guide them; they triangulated their position on Earth using several stars. That's sound advice for today's traveler, too.