

RISING STARS

Graham Bond ponders the hotel industry stars



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rom time immemorial, mankind has looked to the stars. We wish upon them, we dream about them and they guide us in times of doubt – not least when we’re booking our next vacation.

Amid the murkiness of hotel hyperbole, those stars stamped on the reception desk plaque have become the modern traveller’s guiding light – a reliable means of charting a path through our next heavenly holiday. Or that’s the theory at least.

In reality, the star rating system underpinning the hotel industry worldwide is as difficult to pin down as a horoscope column. Despite the way it is casually

banded about by travel agents and tourists, the term ‘five star’ has never been universally defined and – like the universe itself – remains something of a mystery.

The celestial similarities don’t end there. In recent years, the upper limits of the hotel star system have expanded as rapidly as the outer fringes of the galaxy. When it opened in December 2002, the Le Touessrok resort in Mauritius declared itself a ‘six star’ location, reasoning that a Givenchy spa, on-site golf course and two private islands would justify the label. Similarly, some well-managed marketing hype won Dubai’s Burj-al-Arab the colloquial distinction of being

the world’s first seven-star hotel. It is, after all, the only hotel with 24-carat gold fittings, an extending helipad (which has famously doubled as a tennis court) and a restaurant ‘accessible only by submarine’.

So does the creeping expansion of the star rating system signal a new age of luxury, or have the PR gurus simply sabotaged common sense? China, at least, prefers the former analysis. ‘Within months,’ a new platinum rating will be added to the traditional five tiers, lending official credence to the star-multiplication trend and elevating a few of the nation’s finest hotels into the hospitality stratosphere.

Even without a globally recognised system, star labels have gradually acquired a commonly understood currency: one star, poor, five stars, superb. The fact most countries use the same symbol and five-tier framework indicates a desire to coordinate basic standards and to offer customers a rough idea of what to expect.

But in most countries it’s the job of government bodies – each with their own cultural peculiarities and tourism policies – to decide what constitutes a ‘five star’ award. Some nations have additional self-assessment from within the industry and occasionally, as is the case in the US, the government stays completely out of the issue, leaving the job entirely to private interests.

Despite several tentative efforts, no supranational organisation harmonises hospitality standards across national borders. In 1988, the World Tourism

Organisation gave up trying to ensure consistency because of a lack of 'clarity and coordination' amongst its government members. The International Standards Organisation and the World Trade Organisation met in 1998 to jointly discuss the issue but only got as far as 'suggesting' common rules were required for housekeeping, check-in registration and dining. In December 2002, the European Union mooted the desirability of having commonly agreed ground rules but – once again – the idea failed to gather momentum.

John Kidd, General Manager of the Hilton Chongqing, speaks for many in the industry when he labels efforts to form a unified system as 'absolutely futile': "There are just too many regional, geographical and cultural differences. Take Thailand. They have so many really beautiful hotels. They might look at hotels in China and say, 'If they are five star, we should be six stars'. There are little, traditional hotels in Japan – beautiful boutique hotels – that are very high priced. How do you rate those? It's about more than just the building. It's about history and culture. Put a Holiday Inn into Zimbabwe right now and it would be a five-star palace."

In China, all hotels must apply for a star rating. The China National Tourism Authority (CNTA) is the only body permitted to award five stars, a process which involves a five-times-yearly site inspection by national and regional government representatives as well as a senior member of the hospitality industry. Four-stars and below can be assessed by regional authorities, and all awards are verified annually.

In July 2004 the CNTA announced an overhaul of the ratings system, placing new emphasis on less tangible qualities rather than focusing entirely on hardware requirements. The raft of new requirements still includes definitive measurements – 70 per cent of the rooms should be bigger than 20sqm, for example – but now allows more flexible, subjective assessments as well. The hotel's style should be 'outstanding', the management systems 'appropriate' to the star rating and, most controversially perhaps, the PA system must offer 'good quality background music'.

A crucial plank in this package of new measures was the introduction of the platinum tier, though the final implementation has been on hold since July 2004 as the finer details are worked out. Liu Shi Jun, Deputy Director General of CNTA's Hotel Division, says: "We are still at the trial stage but this will happen within months."

"It's similar to a student. If he gets 400 marks, he can go to university, but if he gets 600 marks, he might go to Tsinghua University in Beijing. We want to

position hotels in that market. We want to use those top hotel brands to inspire others with their standards and quality."

The initial impetus for the new rating came from within the industry itself. There had been concern that too many hotels were able to meet simple hardware requirements, despite obvious differences in the quality of facilities, decor, service and management.

This perceived inequality is the reason why many hotels still do take things into their own hands. The undeniably impressive Jiuzhai Paradise resort in

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north Sichuan very publicly regards itself as 'five-star plus'. "Everyone who has been here can tell that our service is better and our hotel is better than the usual five-star rating. It's part of our strategy to promote ourselves," says Li Lun, spokesman for resort owner, California Hotels.

But that idea holds no water with Liu. "I don't think that if a hotel says it is a four or five star *plus* then it can be accepted by the market. In China there has never existed a hotel category like this."

The new platinum rating is likely to initially apply only to Shanghai and Beijing hotels, before being rolled out across the country. In the capital, hotels like the Grand Hyatt and Plaza Royal are expected to apply for the upgrade when the criteria are announced. In Shanghai, the St. Regis and the Portman Ritz-Carlton are likely contenders.

Though the final details have not been confirmed, requirements will almost certainly include both structural and more atmospheric qualities. The initial proposals in 2004 included rooms no smaller than 36sqm, 'particular taste' in the architecture, and executive floors with 24-hour butler service.

Round-the-clock butlers, underwater restaurants, hovering tennis courts – the evolution of the star system certainly appears to go hand-in-hand with a new era of super luxury. But only time will tell if it will further muddy the traditional star system that – though poorly defined – still sets a psychological benchmark for quality and class. **V**



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