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The customer's recourse when a hotel is undergoing renovations



If the hotel you booked is undergoing renovations, even weary travelers are better off in the long run speaking up early, say travel advocates. (Monsterstock1/iStock)

As hotel renovations go, the one Robert Reich experienced was pretty extreme. The property he'd booked in Baltimore, the Mount Vernon Hotel, was being remodeled and reopening as the Hotel Indigo Baltimore — Mt. Vernon.

“Extreme” might also describe what the hotel did to his reservation for this spring. Instead of honoring it, the Indigo, which was under new ownership, canceled all reservations, including his.

“I received no notification about the change,” explains Reich, a government worker who lives in Ocean City, N.J. In fact, he found out about the renovations by coincidence, he said, and learned that his reservation had been canceled a few months before his scheduled arrival. He'd been trying to find out whether he had a place to stay, and he asked me for help.



Most hotel renovation stories are less dramatic. They're minor inconveniences, such as construction noise or a closed pool. A resurgent economy has made them more common this summer. But the problems they cause can all be resolved the same way — with persistence, politeness and patience.

I contacted InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), which owns the Indigo brand, on Reich's behalf. The company reviewed his case, offered to cover the cost of staying at an alternate property for two nights and offered an upgrade to a bigger room.

"This offer was done as a goodwill gesture by IHG," says Sarah-Ann Soffer, a spokeswoman for the company.

The incident raises questions for anyone planning a hotel stay. What happens if the property is under construction? And what recourse do travelers have if it turns out there's effectively no hotel to stay in?

"There's no particular standard or manual as to when to close a hotel during a renovation," says Amanda Parsons, the former general manager of the Hotel Vintage Seattle, a veteran of three hotel remodeling projects. "A hotel needs to be realistic when looking at the scope of the renovation and the overall impact to the guest. After all, we are in the hospitality business and never want an extended renovation to affect the guest experience or our reputation."

But what, exactly, does that mean?



Ideally, a hotel will plan ahead for what accommodations will be unavailable during a renovation, says Maria Pampafikos, who co-owns the Royal Regency Hotel, a boutique hotel in Yonkers, N.Y., that is upgrading its guest rooms, reception areas and ballrooms.

“Each situation must be handled on a case-by-case basis,” she says. “The worst situation for any front desk agent or hotel manager to deal with is a guest walking into your facility to check in and the facility not having an accommodation for that guest. It’s important to prepare ahead of time to avoid this situation.”

But even the best-laid plans sometimes fall apart. Construction can take longer than expected. Amenities might be unavailable. That’s hardly unique to a renovation effort.

When peace and quiet are in short supply, the hotel can usually address the issue if it’s notified quickly. For example, if the jackhammers outside your window are keeping you awake during your afternoon nap, the hotel might be able to move you to a different room or comp your breakfast for the inconvenience.

Waiting until you get home to complain is less effective. Often, a hotel can do little more at that stage than apologize for the inconvenience, a gesture that will probably ring hollow after a noise-filled vacation.



In extreme cases, when construction is so severe that the room is uninhabitable, a hotel may even turn you away before check-in. When that happens, the standard industry practice is to “walk” you to another property. In that scenario, the hotel will cover at least one night in a comparable place nearby.

“If you have to walk a guest to another hotel, it is typical for the renovating hotel to pay for the guest’s accommodations at the other hotel and make the arrangements for the guest,” says Beau Benton, president of Larry Blumberg & Associates, a hotel management company based in Dothan, Ala. “For loyalty club members, you may also see compensation to the guest in the form of awarding points, even though they actually stayed at another property.”

You can avoid the inconvenience — and the possibility of being walked — by taking a few simple steps. Experts recommend that you monitor social media buzz about the property where you’ll be staying. Even though a hotel might try to keep its renovations hush-hush, their guests are less likely to wait for the big reveal before offering their opinions about the work in progress.

“Customers are always happy to share,” says Bonnie Best, the general manager for the Hotel Valencia Santana Row, a luxury hotel in San Jose, Calif., which just finished renovating its rooms, guest corridors, lobby and bar.



Sam Cicero, the founder of Cicero's Development, a general contractor in Plainfield, Ill., that specializes in hotels, says the direct approach works best: Call and ask.

"A phone call works the best, prior to arrival," he says. "Ask if there are any areas of the hotel due to be under renovation during the period of your stay."

Beyond that, if you find yourself in a property that you find is not suitable for your vacation, consider brushing up on your rights under the state's innkeeper laws, which are searchable online. For example, Title 15 of Maryland's Business Code outlines an innkeeper's rights and responsibilities and covers topics such as a property's liability for your valuables and rate-disclosure requirements.

Strictly speaking, none of the laws give you a right to a noise-free room. But that doesn't mean you have to suffer. The best hotel managers try their hardest to make a renovation project known "as soon possible to the hotel guests," Cicero notes. And when they can't, they try to address the situation proactively before you even have time to complain.

If you do want to say something, don't wait. Mind your manners and invoke the hotel's reputation for customer service to persuade them to take care of you. Because if you remain quiet, your only option will be a set of reliable earplugs. That's no way to travel.