

Tarred with Basil's brush

With high costs and poor customer service, Britain's hotels leave plenty of room for improvement

IT'S a tough time to be a hotelier in the UK. Visitor numbers are still down following foot and mouth and September 11 and consumers' demands and buying habits are changing.

When it seemed things couldn't get any worse, Labour MP Chris Bryant, a member of the Government's Culture, Media and Sport select committee, really stuck the knife in. Commenting on the quality of accommodation in Blackpool he endorsed at the Labour party conference, he said: "Standards were like prisoner-of-war camp Stalag Luft 3. I am keen to see quality improve and prices drop. The UK is an expensive place for accommodation."

Bryant's criticism, made at a meeting of Government tourism chiefs, were widely reported by the media.

British Hospitality Association chief executive Bob Coates

REPORT BY JOHN LAMARIE

thinks Bryant is wrong, but admitted the industry could do more to improve its image.

"You see some of the best service in the world in Britain and some of the worst. We must get more offering the best," he said.

And what of the accusation that British hotels are pricey?

"Britain is an expensive place to do business. We've got the second highest rate of VAT in Europe, the French only pay 5.5% on hotel rooms."

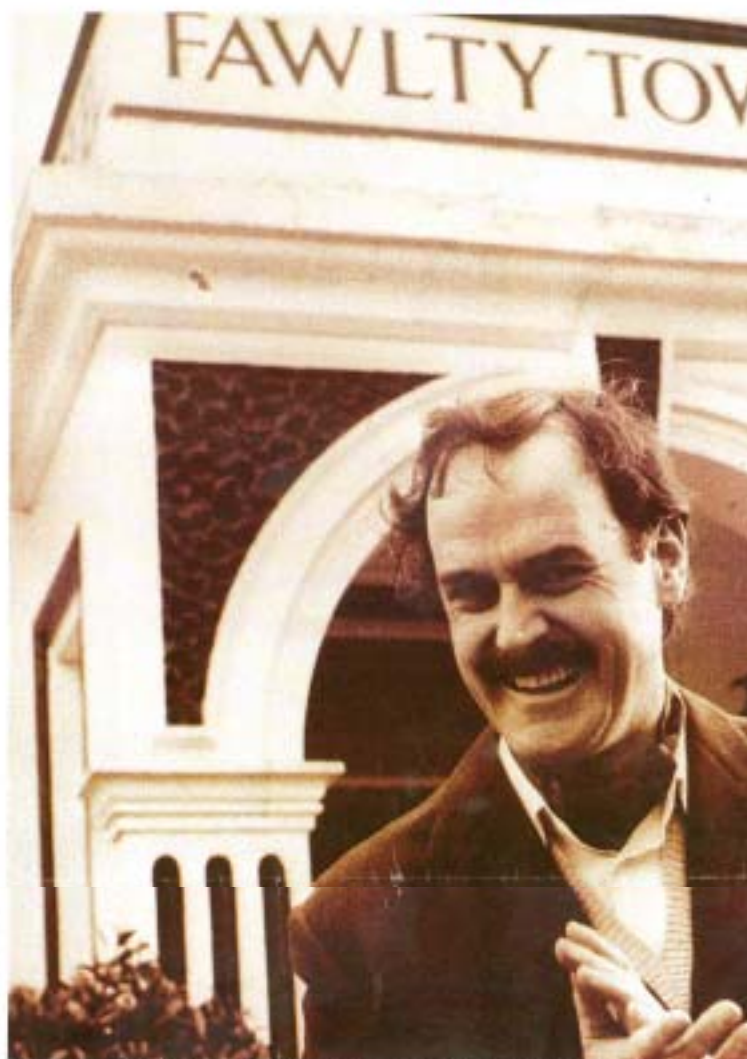
American Express recently found London the most expensive city in a poll of capitals, topping Brussels, Rome and Madrid. Average mid-range hotel prices in London during the second quarter of this year were £125 compared to £90 in Brussels, £84 in Rome and £74 in Madrid.

Lean and mean

But price isn't Coates's biggest concern. Instead, it's the inconsistency in service standards across the country. He welcomed the Government's proposed Fitness for Purpose scheme, aimed at ensuring properties across the UK meet minimum standards, an idea proposed months ago by the Tourism Alliance. Any hotel that doesn't shape up risks closure.

Coates said most of these standards are already set down

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As Basil Fawcett frequently demonstrated in *Fawlty Towers*, customer service can be the difference between a real

in a variety of laws, but some parts of the country are more stringent at enforcing them than others. France, Germany and the Benelux countries already have similar schemes in place.

Tourism Minister Kim Howells also recognises that standards differ.

"The quality of hotel accommodation is a priority. It's a major part of many visitors' expenditure and influences their

perception of Britain," he said.

"The Government strongly supports the national quality standards to which the English Tourism Council, the AA and the RAC all operate (the one to five-star hotel rating system).

"While this has led to improvements in accommodation, many hotels are not members of the scheme.

"This is why we are planning a fundamental review of the

approach to accommodation quality in Britain and are actively pursuing our Fitness for Purpose initiative."

Starring role

But the star-rating system is primarily facilities-based and does not offer a true reflection of the standard of service. In theory you could stay at a five-star property with 200 TV channels, thirteen modern plugs, and all

CUTTING THE MUSTARD

The £50-a-night **Carlton Hotel** doesn't worry about star ratings. Situated across the road from King's Cross station, it could well be the first part of call for newly arrived overseas visitors. Handily, reception was open 24 hours and staff were courteous. The room was clean and came with a television, telephone and en-suite bathroom. However, the heating did not work, the curtains were paper-thin and stepping into the lift was like taking a bungee jump. This was a cheap and cheerful night, but experienced travellers would know there's better quality rooms for less money in other countries.

Travel Weekly arrived at the **Radisson Edwardian Marlborough** to find there was no record of the reservation. To make matters worse, one of the receptionists was so rude while checking in we came close to walking out. The room was of a high quality, but additional products such as mini-bar items and phone calls were very expensive (a can of Coke was £2, while a gin miniature was £5. Phone calls were up to £2.05 a minute). When taken to task, Radisson invited us back

for a second stay, this time at the **Radisson Edwardian Hampshire**. Things were much better. Check-in was swift, the staff were polite, room service was prompt and the room offered a spectacular view over Leicester Square. But at £179, with breakfast, it was the least we could have expected.

One Aldwych is a modern, boutique member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World near Covent Garden. From the off, things went very well, with friendly door staff smoothing the way for a swift and hassle-free check-in. Throughout the stay staff addressed me by name, whether they were hailing a cab in the rain or serving drinks at the bar. The bedroom was decorated in a contemporary style and boasted a CD player with access to a CD library and satellite television among its treats. Nice touches included brand name toiletries, a card giving the weather forecast for the following day and fluffy bath robes. Despite its central location no outside noise could be heard in the bedrooms. A basic double bedroom leads in at £195 excluding breakfast. Once again, mini-bar costs made me wince.



hotel and a five-star experience

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varied enormously. But perhaps most worrying is the discovery that paying top money doesn't necessarily guarantee a top experience. As our mystery shop discovered, standards really do vary. The more expensive properties can make the most basic mistakes when dealing with guests. The visitor faces further confusion when a four-star hotel in Newcastle can offer a totally different standard of service to a similar property in Edinburgh.

To be fair to Britain's hoteliers, forces are at work over which they have no control. The exchange rate instantly makes life expensive for foreign visitors. Meanwhile, the decline in overseas bednights means everybody is after a slice of a much smaller pie.

Increased investment in training would increase staff standards while the entire industry would benefit if it worked together and created a universal ratings system. As every travel agent knows, the accommodation-only market is growing and the UK should cash in on this trend.

The biggest stumbling block, however, is the inconsistency in service levels and failure to have a standard ratings system enforced across the UK. If our European neighbours can manage it, surely we can too.

the room safes and trouser presses you need. But there still may be nobody to help carry your luggage to your room and reception could close at 5pm.

Try explaining that to the jet lagged businessman who has just flown in from Sydney and can't get his hands on a ham sandwich because "the chef's gone home".

Just to muddy the waters further, the Scottish have a different rating system that is heavily service focused.

It might be coincidence, but consumers' buying patterns are also changing. Leisure travellers are spending less time and money in the UK while business travellers are turning their backs on four-star properties and staying in budget-branded hotels such as Travel Inn.

Put to the test

For a taste of the typical UK welcome available to overseas visitors, Travel Weekly went undercover at three London hotels - the basic (and no-star) £50-a-night Carlton Hotel across the road from King's Cross station; the four-star Radisson Edwardian Marlborough; and the upmarket boutique property One Aldwych (see box).

Unsurprisingly, the results

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