

Good, but not quite good enough?

Tourists tell TODAY why they expected better from Singapore's hotels

They came, charmed by the image of Singapore as a clean, green, multi-cultural city according to many who have visited, and depicted as such in glossy advertisements.

But while Mr and Mrs Angell from the United Kingdom enjoyed themselves here, not everything quite lived up to what they had envisioned.

"At the hotel we stayed at, the concierge didn't seem to know anything. We asked them where to get chocolates and they sent us to Far East Plaza, which had nothing we were looking for," said Mr Angell, who declined to give his full name.

"Perhaps they can be taught the relevant skills, because they seemed to have a lack of knowledge which concierges should have," he added.

As Singapore continues to build up its reputation as a premier destination for travellers, expectations from tourists appear to have risen in tandem. And this may mean the tourism sector needs to work harder: Findings from the Customer Satisfaction Index released by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) two weeks ago found that visitors were less satisfied by the service in the tourism sector here this year, compared with previous years.

Consumers were asked to rate their satisfaction for attractions and hotels, as well as tour operators, travel and ticketing agencies. On a 100-point scale; the overall score for Singapore's tourism sector dipped by 3.5 points from last year to 70 points.

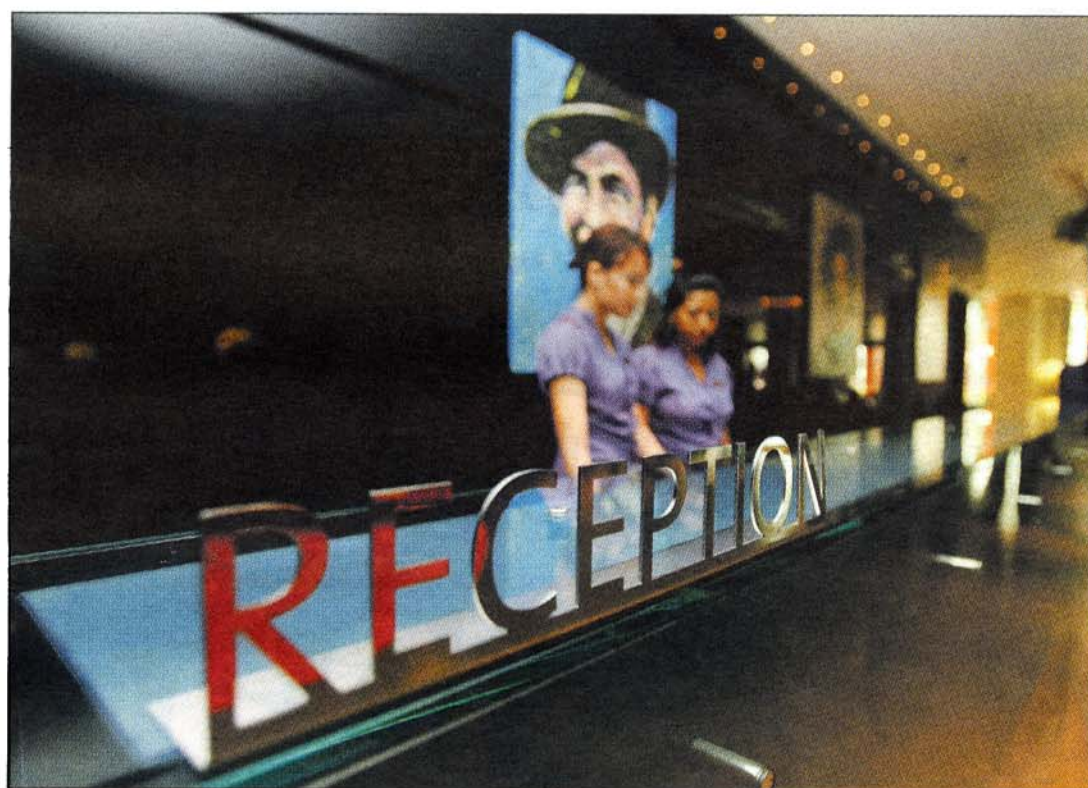
In particular, the satisfaction levels of tourists fell to 72.6 points from 77.8 points last year. In contrast, the satisfaction levels of locals rose to 70.2 points from 68.4 points last year.

Among the sub-sectors, the hotel sub-sector registered the largest decline, dropping 4.4 points or 5.9 per cent to 70.2 points. The satisfaction levels of tourists experienced the sharpest decline, dropping by 8.2 per cent.

IT'S THE LITTLE DETAILS

While hotels still topped the index with higher scores than other businesses in the sector, it was the attention to detail that tourists seemed to find lacking.

According to the index, factors such as staff courtesy in hotels, food



Many hotels agree that the benchmarks that have been set for the hospitality industry have led to increasingly higher expectations of service standards. TODAY FILE PHOTO

quality, room amenities and staff helpfulness received poor ratings from tourists this year, leading to the overall decrease.

"Compared to other neighbouring countries, Singapore is more developed ... There is no communication barrier as most people speak English here, so I didn't expect any problems like I would have in, for example, Thailand," said retiree Carmen Miot, 70.

Canadian paramedic Peter Panagakos, 31, thought that the hotel he stayed at appeared to be short-staffed and took a longer time attending to his needs.

His friend, Mr Petar Salinovic, 27, felt that the staff could have been more helpful when the hotel was fully booked and they could not extend their stay.

"They were polite enough when explaining the situation. But as a someone working in a customer-service driven industry, they could have given us some recommendations instead of stopping short at that," he said.

Social worker Anne Boyle, 60, from Australia, said it was the little touches, such as service from breakfast staff, that tarnished her otherwise "exceptional" experience at a five-star hotel.

"For example, I wanted some bread but the bread counter had run out. I suppose, for me, I expected the staff to notice these things and to replace

food items which had run out without us having to ask," she said.

While she emphasised that she encountered helpful staff — such as the concierge who took the trouble to print out directions to a dumpling restaurant — she pointed out that negative experiences tend to stay with tourists when they leave and that she had expected better, given what she was paying.

STAYING ONE STEP AHEAD

Hotels TODAY spoke to agreed that benchmarks set for the hospitality industry have led to increasingly higher expectations of service standards.

General Manager of Royal Plaza on Scotts Patrick Fiat said: "Many guests expect early check-in upon arrival after a long flight and also request for complimentary late check-out. This is a challenge to all hotels when occupancy is running high and room service turnaround time is not quick enough to cope with demand due to the current labour crunch situation."

Smaller hotels may also find it difficult to offer a competitive salary range to attract experienced manpower compared to larger ones, said Orchid Hotel General Manager Jimmy Teo.

To address the manpower crunch, Mr Fiat said the Royal Plaza on Scotts has embarked on a productivity drive.

| OVERALL SATISFACTION LEVELS FOR HOTELS | | |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| | 2012 satisfaction level | Change in satisfaction level from 2011 |
| Hotel Sector (Overall) | 70.1 | -4.4 |
| Marina Bay Sands | 75.5* | — |
| The Ritz Carlton | 75.4 | -5.9 |
| Shangri-La Hotel | 73.7 | -6.7 |
| Mandarin Orchard | 73.1 | -6.7 |
| Swissotel the Stamford | 72.8 | -6.9 |
| Grand Hyatt | 72.8 | -7.1 |
| Other hotels | 68.5 | -4.2 |

*This is the first year of measurement for Marina Bay Sands

"Technology will be introduced and upgraded to improve productivity and to meet the increasing expectations of guests. Being people-focused is also an area that the organisation is continuously working on as our associates play a vital role in establishing an emotional connection with our hotel guests," he said.

Dr Lynda Wee, a consultant in retail management, strategic planning and people development, said that the development and publicity of Singapore's two integrated resorts could have contributed to tourists' awareness of our country, while the increasing availability of low-cost carriers promotes accessibility for value-seeking tourists.

"Hence, Singapore is able to attract a wider range of tourists to visit us. These visitors become more diversified depending on where they come from and the value that they are seeking. Their needs differ," she explained.

The quality of service in Singapore may not have dropped but the service sector should move beyond "generic customer service solutions" that are not specific to each customer's needs, she advised.

"Most service staff are equipped with basics such as 'GST' — greet, smile and thank. While this gesture is great, it does nothing to retain guests," she said.

"Hospitality is about anticipating guests' needs and ensuring they have a pleasant stay.

"It is about putting ourselves in their shoes, thinking ahead and being proactive in service."

WOO SIAN BOON

70 points
 THE OVERALL SCORE FOR SINGAPORE'S TOURISM SECTOR, WHICH DIPPED BY 3.5 POINTS FROM LAST YEAR