

The evolution of serviced apartments

Slowly but surely serviced apartments have become a serious contender for the hotel industry's strength in the PA accommodation booking market. **JOANNE CHRISTIE** explores how the industry has evolved

In the past, the decision between a hotel and a serviced apartment was sometimes seen as a choice between quantity and quality. It's obvious you get more space with an apartment, but the lack of a widespread grading system meant many users were uncertain what sort of quality they'd receive and how it compared to that offered by hotels. Gradually, however, the level of standardisation in the serviced apartment industry has increased and coupled with the explosion in online review sites, it's now far easier to work out whether or not a serviced apartment is suitable for your needs.

A star grading system for serviced apartments was introduced by VisitBritain back in 2007 and Jo Redman, board member at the Association of Serviced Apartment Providers (ASAP), says this has helped educate end users. "It is very useful for customers and potential customers to more accurately make a decision about what kind of apartment they are choosing. So rather than taking a serviced apartment company's word for how fabulous their apartments are or what standards they work to, it is completely independent and non-biased," says Jo. "It is linked to hotel gradings and it gives a sense of familiarity to a customer. Certainly the star rating schemes for serviced apartments are marketed slightly differently, but if an apartment has been graded five star then from a customer's point of view they know that they »

» should be arriving at something fairly luxurious compared to two star or three star apartments.”

However, the launch of the scheme sparked much debate among providers and some chose not to sign up, particularly large worldwide companies and smaller operators. But even if an apartment does not have a star rating, there are other ways to assess its suitability. For a start, membership of a professional body such as ASAP is a useful indicator that a provider is committed to certain quality standards. Although ASAP does not compile reviews, it does offer a feedback service and users who aren't happy with their experience with a member organisation can complain to ASAP, who will act as a mediator to try and resolve the dispute.

Do you research

Rebecca Hollants van Loocke, UK Regional General Manager at The Ascott Limited, which operates the Ascott, Citadines and Somerset serviced apartment brands, also advises researching review sites. “Like hotels today, there is an awful lot of information out there for the customer to look up if they wish to find out what people have said or felt about staying in an apartment,” she says.

But customer opinions do have to be taken with a grain of salt, particularly as some users may not be fully aware of how serviced apartments differ from hotels. Though a grading system is now in place, there is still a lack of understanding of the differences between hotel gradings and serviced apartment gradings, says Tracey Stephenson, Managing Director and Co-owner at Staying Cool apartments. “There might be a communications gap between the actual standards and how they are perceived by end users. It is great for us as a provider to have the 5 star rating but I'm not sure if people know what that means. There is a perception that 5 star means somebody following you around carrying your bags and providing turn down service,” she says. “Some people really relish having turn down service at night and having their bags carried all the time, those people are probably more suited to a hotel.”

Rebecca agrees. “I think that an understanding of what is different in the serviced apartment sector is still not fully developed. The real benefit is the flexibility of the space, the fact that the space is yours and can become your home, particularly when you are staying that longer period of time. You have the ability to cook, relax, work

and entertain in your apartment. You can also have people stay in your apartment and hold meetings in your apartment. I think all of that is a huge plus which generally in a hotel is not the case.”

Identifying needs

If your boss likes to be pampered, a hotel might be a better bet. But if they are seeking a home away from home and would relish the opportunity to make their own breakfast while in their PJs, a serviced apartment might fit the bill. Though the cost of a serviced apartment is often broadly comparable with that of a hotel, the savings in expenses bills can be substantial. For a start, cooking facilities will lead to savings on restaurant and room service bills, and the additional space will also allow for small meetings in the room, cutting room hire expenses. Little extras such as wifi are usually provided for free, unlike in many hotels.

Deciding a serviced apartment is the way to go is only one part of the equation, however, and finding the right one can be more time-consuming than booking a hotel as the sector is much more fragmented and many providers run their own websites and booking systems.

However, there are booking agencies that specialise in serviced apartment bookings. Richard Majewski, Owner of Accomotel and Founder of the Serviced Apartment Bookers Association (SABA), says many corporate users, such as PAs, seek help from agencies. “If you wanted a serviced apartment and you stipulate your budget, you could in theory spend a massive amount of time finding that property. This is where leisure clients and corporate clients split. Leisure clients do have forever and a day to look. In the corporate world the job more often than not lands on somebody's desk who isn't actually the end user and it is just a job that they need to get off their desk. They can't sit there for hours looking at the internet and trying to find a serviced apartment for somebody.”

SABA, which launched in late 2009, is currently drawing up its own code of conduct for members, but Richard says that the growing awareness of the benefits of serviced apartments in the corporate sector has already had a big impact on standards. “Corporates demand higher standards than regular bookers and if those aren't met they will complain. Corporates are more frequent bookers and they have driven the standards up.” ■

What to expect from serviced apartments

★★★

- Enough hot beverages for at least one night
- Two of the following four things: tumble drier, wifi or internet connection, hi-fi or stereo, and video or dvd recorder
- Toiletries and toilet paper on arrival
- Washing machine or communal laundry, or 24-hour washing service

★★★★

- Breakfast ingredients provided for at least one night (may be a charge)
- Washing machine in the apartment
- Freezer space
- Dishwasher or free dishwashing service

★★★★★

- Air conditioning
- 24-hour concierge/manned reception
- Direct dial telephone inside apartment
- Free breakfast ingredients for at least one night
- Toiletries to be topped up continuously
- Daily cleaning service available at least five days per week