

TRAVEL | UPDATE

## At Value-Focused Hotels, the Free Breakfast Gets Bigger

By SHIVANI VORA SEPT. 20, 2016

At some affordably priced hotels in the United States, a free breakfast is increasingly a perk of a stay.

And these aren't the expected cereal and toast meals: Properties are getting creative by offering expanded buffets and health-conscious dishes.

Best Western Hotels & Resorts, for example, where room rates average \$120 a night, recently introduced a revamped breakfast program at its more than 1,000 properties in the United States. While a free breakfast has been a brand standard for several decades, it comprised basic items such as toast and cereal, said Ron Pohl, Best Western's senior vice president for brand management.

Now, clients are offered a wide-ranging buffet. Build Your Own stations are the cornerstone of the makeover: All Best Westerns have a yogurt parfait and oatmeal bar with toppings like granola, shredded coconut and honey sourced from local bee farms.

Other stations vary by property — there could be a crepe and French toast bar with garnishes like Nutella; a sandwich bar where guests can make their own sandwiches using local cheeses; or an omelet station with meats and vegetables.

Gluten-free granolas and cereals and nondairy milk such as soy, almond, coconut and rice are also on the menu. Time-pressed guests can take brown bags in the "grab and go" area that are filled with breakfast bars, whole fruit and bottled water.

Consumer demand led to the new breakfast, Mr. Pohl said. "We surveyed around 1.5 million guests and found that breakfast plays a significant role with guest satisfaction as well as their choice of hotels and brands," he said.

Holiday Inn Express, with nearly 2,000 locations in the United States, is another value chain upping the breakfast ante with a new buffet of house-baked cinnamon rolls, pancakes that guests make themselves using a one-button machine and healthy options like oatmeal, Greek yogurt and turkey sausage.

Similar to Best Western's, the redo is a move to keep the brand competitive, said Jennifer Gribble, a vice president at InterContinental Hotels Group, the parent company of Holiday Inn Express.

The brand spent \$20 million last year to promote the initiative and plans to spend around \$25 million this year on a similar campaign.

Free breakfast isn't a new amenity, said Adam Weissenberg, the head of travel, hospitality and leisure at the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche, but a better one is. "Since many affordable chains already include breakfast with a stay," he said, "they're differentiating themselves in an increasingly competitive market by improving what they have."

A growing number of affordable independent properties and smaller chains are also part of the trend.

The Sierra Grande Lodge & Spa in Truth or Consequences, N.M., which opened last year and has rooms from \$145 a night, offers a free table service breakfast where guests order from a menu that includes dishes like blue corn and pine nut pancakes with cinnamon butter.

And Hotel Preston, a 196-room property in Nashville, where nightly rates start at \$139, a free breakfast of cage-free eggs, seasonal fruit salad and assorted pastries is an amenity for all guests.

Customers are so enthusiastic about the meal at 506 On the River Inn, a two-year-old boutique hotel in Woodstock, Vt., according to the general manager Josh Hardy, that some eat enough to hold them over until dinner. The spread includes house-made quiches, spiral-cut ham and locally made Cheddar cheese and maple cream butter. "Our breakfast has helped us build a loyal clientele in the short time we've been open," Mr. Hardy said.

If free breakfast is such a winning amenity, why aren't luxury hotels in the United States also throwing it in as part of a stay?

"Expensive hotels don't give you free breakfast because they don't have to," said Bobby Bowers, a hotel analyst at the hotel research company STR. "The guests who stay with them, whether it's for work or pleasure, aren't as budget conscious and don't care about it as much."

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