

Hotels make Internet free but tighten cancellation policies

December 31 2014, by Scott Mayerowitz

Big changes are coming in 2015 for hotel guests, one will save travelers lots of money and another may cause a few headaches.

First, the good news: The big chains, those mega-hotels that cater to [business travelers](#) during the week, are finally following suit of the budget, side-of-the-road properties and offering free Wi-Fi.

And the bad news: Starting Jan. 1 two of the largest hotel chains in the world are making it harder for travelers to cancel reservations.

PRO: FREE WI-FI

Among the expected changes, free access to the Internet will affect the most guests. Possible savings of \$10 to \$15 a night, can really add up over a weeklong vacation. But there are a few strings attached. The majority of chains will require guests to sign up for their free loyalty programs. Basically, if you share a little more personal information, they'll let you surf the Web for free.

At the beginning of 2014, InterContinental Hotels Group, the parent company of Holiday Inn, became the first major chain to offer free Internet to all members of its loyalty program. That's a benefit that had been generally limited to frequent guests who have elite status.

None of the competition followed until a few weeks ago when Marriott International announced that all members of its rewards program would

get free, basic Wi-Fi starting Jan. 15 as long as they booked directly with the company. Elite members of Marriott Rewards will continue to get a faster, premium Internet service for free.

The move is part of a long-term push by hotels to get guests to book through their own websites and call centers instead of services like Orbitz and Expedia, to which they have to pay commissions.

When Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide followed suit, it too had a similar change: free Internet starting Feb. 2 for anybody booking directly; complimentary premium service for elite members.

Hyatt Hotels Corp. was the next big chain to offer free Internet. But unlike the others, its product will be free starting in February no matter what. Guests won't have to sign up for a club and can book through any channel they wish.

"Internet connectivity is no longer an amenity. It has become an integral part of travelers' daily lives and a basic expectation," Kristine Rose, vice president of brands for Hyatt said in a statement. "Travelers shouldn't have to remember which brands or locations offer it for free or the strings attached to get it."

Hilton Worldwide remains the biggest chain not to offer free Internet at all its properties.

The savings can be substantial. For instance, the San Francisco Marriott Marquis charges \$14.95 a night for Internet; the Sheraton Atlanta, \$12.95 a night; and the Hyatt Regency Chicago charges anywhere from \$9.95 to \$39.95 a night, depending on the connection speed.

CON: TOUGHER CANCELLATION POLICIES

Not all of the expected changes will be good for travelers in 2015.

Hilton and Marriott are rolling out new cancellation policies, forcing guests to abandon plans earlier on. Many hotels currently allow guests to cancel as late as 6 p.m. on the night of arrival. That's about to change.

Both hotel chains will, as of Jan. 1, require guests to cancel by midnight the day before they arrive in order to avoid a cancellation fee, typically equal to one night's room rate. Hilton and Marriott both justified the change saying it will make more rooms available for travelers needing last-minute accommodations.

Some travelers have been making reservations long in advance for stays, but then use last-minute deal apps from HotelTonight, Priceline and others to book cheap rooms hours before checking in and then cancel the original reservation. Hotels feel undercut and are left with unused rooms. This change, while not great for deal seekers, will help the hotels better manage inventory.

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