

Robots do check-in and check-out at cost-cutting Japan hotel

July 15 2015, by Yuri Kageyama



A receptionist robot, left, greets a hotel employee, right, demonstrating how to check in for the media at the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

The English-speaking receptionist is a vicious-looking dinosaur, and the

one speaking Japanese is a female humanoid with blinking lashes. "If you want to check in, push one," the dinosaur says. The visitor still has to punch a button on the desk, and type in information on a touch panel screen.

From the front desk to the porter that's an automated trolley taking luggage up to the room, this hotel in southwestern Japan, aptly called Weird Hotel, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs.

Hideo Sawada, who runs the hotel as part of an amusement park, insists using robots is not a gimmick, but a serious effort to utilize technology and achieve efficiency.

Henn na Hotel, as it is called in Japanese, was shown to reporters Wednesday, complete with robot demonstrations, ahead of its opening to the public Friday.

Another feature of the hotel is the use of facial recognition technology, instead of the standard electronic keys, by registering the digital image of the guest's face during check-in.

The reason? Robots aren't good at finding keys, if people happen to lose them.

A giant robotic arm, usually seen in manufacturing, is encased in glass quarters in the corner of the lobby. It lifts one of the boxes stacked into the wall and puts it out through a space in the glass, where a guest can place an item in it, to use as a locker.

The arm will put the box back into the wall, until the guest wants it again. The system is called "robot cloak room."

Why a simple coin locker won't do isn't the point.



A receptionist robot performs during a demonstration for the media at the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

"I wanted to highlight innovation," Sawada told reporters. "I also wanted to do something about hotel prices going up."

Staying at Henn na Hotel starts at 9,000 yen (\$80), a bargain for Japan, where a stay in one of the nicer hotels can easily cost twice or three times that much.

The concierge is a doll-like hairless robot with voice recognition that prattles breakfast and event information. It cannot call a cab or do other

errands.

Japan is a world leader in robotics technology, and the government is trumpeting robotics as a pillar of its growth strategy. Robots have long been used here in manufacturing. But interest is also high in exploring the potential of robots in human interaction, including helping care for the elderly.

Robotics is also key in the decommissioning of the three reactors in Fukushima, northern Japan, which went into meltdowns in 2011, in the worst nuclear catastrophe since Chernobyl.

One area Henn na Hotel still relies on human beings is security.

The place is dotted with security cameras, and real people are watching everything through a monitor to make sure guests stay safe and no one makes off with one of the expensive robots.

"And they still can't make beds," said Sawada, who has also engineered the rise of a popular affordable Japanese travel agency.



A cloak robot, left, waits as a hotel employee leaves her suitcase at the cloak window during a demonstration for the media at the new robot hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

He has big ambitions for his robot hotel concept and wants to open another one soon in Japan, and later abroad. He is also eager to add other languages, such as Chinese and Korean, to the robots' vocabulary.

A block-shaped robot that was scuttling around in the lobby had been brought in to do room service, delivering beverages and simple snacks. But it wasn't ready to do that yet.

Outdoors, Sawada also demonstrated a drone that flew in to deliver a few small jars filled with snacks. He said he wanted to eventually have

drones perform in shows for guests.

In the hotel's rooms, a lamp-size robot in the shape of a fat pink tulip called Tuly answers simple questions like, "What time is it?" and "What is the weather tomorrow?"



A receptionist dinosaur robot performs at the new robot hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

You can also tell it to turn the room lights on or off. There are no switches on the walls.

Sawada is keeping the hotel half-filled for the first few weeks to make sure nothing goes wrong.

He also canceled at the last minute the overnight stay planned for media. The robots simply weren't ready.



A porter robot, left, escorts a hotel employee while carrying his suitcase during a demonstration for the media at the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



A cloak robot moves a box loaded with items received from a guest during a demonstration for the media at the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



A hotel employee talks to concierge robot Tuly at the new robot hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



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Huis Ten Bosch Co. President Hideo Sawada speaks in a guestroom at the newly opened robot hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. Sawada, who runs the hotel as part of his amusement park, insists using robots is not a gimmick, but a serious effort to utilize technology and achieve efficiency. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



Huis Ten Bosch Co. President Hideo Sawada attends the opening ceremony of the robot hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. Sawada, who runs the hotel as part of his amusement park, insists using robots is not a gimmick, but a serious effort to utilize technology and achieve efficiency. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



A receptionist robot, top center, accompanied by two other robots, greets a hotel employee demonstrating how to check in the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)



Two receptionist robots, left, greet a hotel employee demonstrating how to check in the new hotel, aptly called Henn na Hotel or Weird Hotel, in Sasebo, southwestern Japan, Wednesday, July 15, 2015. From the receptionist that does the check-in and check-out to the porter that's a stand-on-wheels taking luggage up to the room, the hotel, that is run as part of Huis Ten Bosch amusement park, is "manned" almost totally by robots to save labor costs. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

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