

# **HOTEL LETDOWN**

## **Customer Impressions**

**Report by**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **Author's Note:**

*Please note that this report is in the brief format style but contains some additional information so that the reader can make sense of this example. We would like to think that hotels like Letdown do not exist. Unfortunately we know otherwise. However, we commend the owners for commissioning the survey, recognising the problems and then making the changes to transform the hotel. We recommend that you also take a look at the report on Hotel Aspire. This is a report written in the verbose format on a near perfect establishment and, therefore, provides an interesting contrast to Hotel Letdown in both performance and report style. You can choose which format you prefer but, in either case, the content will be determined by how well the hotel and its staff perform on the day.*

Hotel Letdown has 17 rooms and charges £55 per night. It is regarded as a 3 Star and claims to cater for everybody whether they are on business or staying as a family. The hotel has its own restaurant and small bar, open to the public, but no fitness suite. However, a range of massages were on offer as a service provided within the hotel.

There was little to recommend the hotel apart from its city centre location. Every experience we had from making the initial booking to checking out at departure was below an acceptable standard for any establishment, let alone a 3 star hotel. We were as disappointed with the attitude of the majority of the staff as we were with the 'hard' facilities such as the room and the food.

We have made numerous recommendations to bring the hotel up to standard. Some are simple and no or very low cost, such as replacing the Information Packs, but, in reality, money will need to be spent in several areas. An improved environment would undoubtedly impact positively on the staff but they would still need to perform a lot better to meet customer expectations. In some cases, training may be all that is required but others are probably a lost cause. We would like to suggest the hotel starts again, recruiting only high quality individuals but the owners will have to examine their legal obligations and make their own assessment of who is worth keeping before embarking on such a radical step.

We believe the owners had a strong suspicion about the poor performance of their hotel but will probably still be shocked by the extent of the problems. However, we believe that the hotel could have a bright future. The amount of time and money that needs to be invested should be recouped quickly through increased business given the prime location of the site. However, we would strongly suggest that the hotel is given a new name to match its new image. A re-launch of the hotel, and website, could attract a lot of local media interest; particularly if this followed a period in the quiet season where the hotel was closed to accommodate a major refurbishment programme. We wish the owners well with their venture and hope that we have the opportunity to visit the hotel again, after the improvements have been made.

## INTRODUCTION

### Hotel Letdown

- 17 rooms;
- £55 per night;
- Rated a 3 Star in the tourist brochures;
- Claim to cater for business people and families;
- Owners not generally on site (business interests in London).

### Facilities:

- Restaurant (also open to the public);
- Bar (also open to the public);
- Masseur available by appointment.

### Scenario:

- Visited during early May Bank Holiday weekend at the client's request;
- Regular day manager was away;
- Night manageress was to be on duty;
- SMIHE asked to provide husband and wife team and 'take it as it comes';
- Requested to comment on the manageress in particular.

### Team:

- Mr & Mrs Johnson;
- On a short break touring the West Coast of Scotland;
- This was second of four nights away;
- Martin Johnson works for big insurance company;
- Kate Johnson works part-time as a nurse;
- Both live in detached house on outskirts of Gloucester.

## RESERVATIONS (☆)

- Reservation took 7 attempts:
- Phone left to ring from 6 rings to 2 minutes;
- Eventually answered 11:05 on 8th February;
- Greeting was, 'Just a minute';
- No apology when came back 42 seconds later;
- Did not know who we were speaking to;
- Chat in background about boyfriend and going to 'Cuckoo's Nest' that night;
- Conversation then went:

- ‘Have you a room available for the night of 1 May?’
- ‘Yeah, sure. How many nights?’
- ‘Just one.’
- ‘Okay. Credit card please’
- ‘What’s that for?’
- ‘In case you cancel within 3days of arrival. It does happen yur know.’
- ‘Hmm, okay, its xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx.’
- ‘Okay, see you then then.’
- ‘Ah, can I confirm that with you and get a reservation number please.’
- ‘Don’t do them but its all booked, single room for one night on 1st May.’
- ‘But we need a double for the 2 of us. How much will that be and what facilities do you have?’
- ‘Sorry, you should have said. One double then. That’s £110. We’ve got a nice bar, rooms are nice, some are a bit small, and a restaurant.’
- ‘Are any of your rooms non-smoking?’
- ‘No, `fraid not. Funny, we get asked that a lot.’
- ‘We plan to arrive about 1pm, will we still be able to get some food in the restaurant?’
- ‘Last orders are at (shouts to colleague in background), yeah 1 o`clock. Rooms aren’t available till 2 so you might want to eat before you get here.’
- ‘Thank you. One last thing, how do we find the hotel?’
- ‘We’re just off the main road, by Tesco’s. You cannot miss it.’
- ‘Do you have a map?’
- ‘Did have but haven’t seen it for weeks but we’re easy to find, just ask anyone for Tesco. You might need to use their car park too as ours is a bit small but if you’re here early you should be okay. Bye.’

Needless to say we were not comforted by the reservation procedure. In particular:

- We did not feel welcomed;
- We were left with an impression of a small, noisy, dirty hotel;
- We were not confident that a double room had been reserved;
- We were unsure of what to bring to make best use of the hotel facilities and local area;
- The staff seemed to lack knowledge and any commitment to the hotel’s customers;
- Making the booking was hard work, no information was offered and it was up to us to ask the right questions;
- We were particularly aggrieved by the price. It is a peculiarly British thing to charge per person instead of for the room. The additional cost to the hotel if 2 people share a room is minimal so it seems morally wrong to charge twice the price of single occupancy. This pricing policy should change;

- There was an atmosphere of inflexibility that made us feel inhuman and unwanted.

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS (☆)**

### **Website:**

- Viewed after making the booking, deliberately so as not to influence first contact;
- Page rendered very slowly (average 1 min 49 seconds over 3 runs on ISDN connection);
- Pointless scrolling animation on main page, no doubt adding to slow rendering;
- Fussy, poorly designed front page was confusing;
- Broken links (Eg to 'Tourist Information' and 'Site Map');
- No information about restaurant;
- Heavy use of poor quality photographs;
- Little factual information;
- Room prices out of date (showed £49-50);
- Main page generated 254 errors when run through the World Wide Web Consortium's validator (tests if page complies with W3C web standards);
- Poorly placed in search engine (Google);
- No facility to make on-line reservations;
- Highly unlikely to have booked hotel from information on web site.

### **Arrival:**

- Beautiful sunny day but front of hotel bathed in cold dark shadow;
- Exterior not appealing, flaking paint, broken stonework and litter on adjacent pavements;
- Car park uneven with pools of water in the potholes;
- Back entrance to hotel from car park very badly marked;
- No directions from back entrance to Reception;
- Corridor was dark and in need of redecoration.

## **CHECK IN (☆)**

- Nobody at Reception desk on arrival at 2:15pm;
- On second ringing of bell, Manageress arrived;
- Initially could not find booking, receptionist at lunch, list of today's arrivals not been made up yet;
- Allocated room 12. Found by questioning that this was above public bar. Asked for quieter room at the back;
- Manageress unhappy about move, 'We'll have to redo all our lists'. (Did not quiz about earlier excuse that lists had not been made up yet.). Reallocated Room 22;
- Key had huge metal plate attached, inscribed, HOTEL LETDOWN, DO NOT

REMOVE FROM HOTEL, COST OF REPLACEMENT £25, ROOM 22. We found this irritating because:

- Key was awkward and inconvenient to carry around;
- Did not feel like we were being treated like responsible people;
- Implied lack of trust;
- Not good for security (accepting that key should not be taken out of hotel).
- Despite comments about availability of food on arrival when we made booking, we asked the Manageress if she had anything available. Offered some curled up sandwiches from the bar, which we declined;
- Porter not available, off sick. Had to struggle up 2 flights of stairs with suitcase.

## **ROOM (☆)**

### **Room 22**

- This room was not ready;
- Window faced onto adjacent building wall 5 feet away;
- Had twin single beds.

Manageress was not apologetic, didn't actually say it was our fault for wanting a different room but implied so. Reallocated Room 14.

### **Room 14**

- Partially met our preferences. Had 4` 6" double bed and was not directly over bar but overlooked street;
- Smelt strongly of tobacco smoke;
- Reasonably size overall but bathroom was disproportionably large despite having no bath;
- Only one set of small, thin towels;
- 2 cracked tiles and several badly fitted, uneven and not straight. One patterned tile fitted sideways;
- Consumables comprised small shampoo, that looked like it may have been opened and used previously, and two soaps;
- Light over mirror had one bulb not working;
- Slight evidence of black mould on ceiling above the shower (not extensive);
- Extractor fan noisy and dirty but was powerful;
- Checking under the bed was not wise as several months of dust had accumulated, but by no means the worst we have come across;
- Fitted desk in mahogany was home to small colour TV (BBC 1 and 2, ITV and channel 4 only), a paper folder with information (some leaflets as old as 1996) and the tea making facilities;
- White melamine covered chipboard chest of drawers out of keeping with rest of furniture and had seen better days;

- Wardrobe bare except for rail with 6 fitted hangar holders but only 5 of the removable coat hangar pieces;
- Small round pedestal table had a small vase on it filled with silk flowers that, judging by the discolouration, were several years old;
- Two chairs, one for the desk and a small green covered armchair;
- Carpet was a patterned red and obviously predated the rest of the room decoration and colouring (beige and green curtains, paintwork etc).

The Manageress was approached about the smell and towels. Action was promised on both counts; nothing was done about the smell but 2 towels, similarly small and thin, were delivered. All in all the room was a disappointment but seemed typical of the standard throughout the hotel. The following would make a big difference although the cost would not be insignificant. However, some interim measures would be low or no cost and could be implemented quickly.

- Put matching furniture in each room;
- Throw out old ornaments such as the silk flowers;
- Replace the information folder covers and replace the contents;
- Improve signposting and lighting for guests arriving from car park;
- Hire staff that are customer focussed and trained appropriately;
- Move bathroom partitioning walls to create a better balance between room and bathroom;
- Redecorate throughout to a common theme;
- Replace furniture to a common theme;
- Provide Kingsize beds;
- Fit modern communications including dataport, telephone and satellite TV;
- Replace TVs with larger more modern TVs;
- Clean up and resurface car park.

## **FACILITIES (☆)**

- Very little information about hotel in Information Pack. To be fair, with no fitness suite or public rooms, there was not much to say;
- Separate A5 flyer indicated masseuse available at hotel by appointment;
- Receptionist recommended Swedish body massage and said they had a room for the exclusive use of customers;
- As the only facility of note, a one hour massage was booked for 5:30pm;
- At 4pm, asked Manageress if we could have some tea and decaffeinated coffee;
- Appeared to be an unusual request;
- Initially told tea and coffee making facilities were available in room. We responded by requesting it to be served to us in the foyer;
- Request was agreed but they didn't do decaffeinated coffee. We went for 2 teas;
- Tea served by Manageress in Stainless Steel teapot and 2 non-matching cups. Two small pre-packed biscuits, both digestives, were also provided;

- Denise, the masseuse, arrived hurriedly at 5:40;
- 'Exclusive' massage room turned out to be a 12ft square room with no window and home to spare chairs, conference equipment, etc;
- Denise set up her table and we eventually got underway at 5:55;
- Denise has regular job as a hairdresser, 2 young children and no husband, all of which explained why she was late and hurried;
- Massage was good but had to end at 6:45 as she needed to get home to children;
- Unable to put cost onto hotel bill, Denise wanted cash.

As a 3 Star hotel in town, we were not expecting many facilities but we felt those that were offered should be integrated into the hotel services and presented nicely and with respect for the customer. Regrettably, this was not the case at Hotel Letdown. Provision of tea and coffee is a basic function and not a difficult, or an expensive, service to get right. A matching china tea service, a mix of biscuits (taken out of their packets) served cordially would eliminate most criticisms. We identified an unused attic room that had a period fireplace and a reasonable view over the town that, with a coat of paint, new carpet and some heating, would make a very pleasant and private room for the masseuse. A little lateral thought and commitment would improve the facilities markedly.

## **DINNER (☆)**

### **Dining Room:**

- Recently redecorated and looked okay but not exceptional;
- Some old mismatching furniture retained and added to;
- No advantage of redecoration taken to redesign layout, resulting in 2 tables that were very difficult for the waiting staff to get to and 3 where people were continually shuffling chairs to let other people pass;
- Dining room was almost deserted so we had our choice of seat (nobody to show us to a table), we chose a secluded bay near the window;
- No staff evident for first 4 and a half minutes of sitting down;
- Waitress, name Melinda, dressed in Jeans, T-shirt and trainers that were not particularly clean;
- No welcome, just thrust menus and asked if we would like a drink;
- Candle on the table but this was not lit for us.

### **Menu:**

- Poor lighting and menu design made it difficult to read the choices;
- Uninspiring choice of dishes, no specials or anything out of the ordinary;
- No specific vegetarian options listed;
- Waitress suggested that Macaroni cheese, some pizzas and the fish dishes might be suitable for vegetarians;
- Waitress unable to answer questions on dishes that may contain nuts;
- Ordered a rare steak and an omelette without cheese (menu choices were cheese and mushroom, cheese and tomato, cheese and ham) and a side salad.

At this point, a large party of 12 came in and requested a table. The horrified waitress (who appeared to be on her own) rushed away and came back with the Manageress, who accepted their booking and helped rearrange tables.

**Service:**

- Full 8 minutes before waitress took our order through to kitchen;
- Drinks still hadn't arrived at this point but were brought soon after by the barman;
- He polished the glasses in front of us and opened the bottle of wine as if it were champagne. In reality it was a very mediocre house white;
- 11½ minutes after ordering, waitress advised that all omelettes came with cheese. Our protests and suggestion to just leave out the cheese were taken through to the kitchen but the advice was that the omelettes came pre-prepared and it wasn't possible to leave out the cheese;
- Concerned that we might never get in our order before the party, we quickly ordered a plain pizza instead of the omelette;
- 30 minutes after ordering the steak was delivered, with the pizza to follow;
- The first cut revealed that the steak was tough and very well done;
- Attracting the waitress was difficult as she was away getting a drinks order for the party;
- However, she did return with the pizza 3 minutes after delivering the steak, minus the side salad, which we still wanted;
- Our complaint about the steak was immediately referred to the Manageress (good decision in the circumstances) whilst the waitress went to rustle up a salad;
- The Manageress grimaced visibly in our view and clearly had us pigeon-holed as difficult customers;
- She was indignant that we had complained, suggesting the steak was perfectly edible and that if we wanted it changed, it could be a long wait. Nevertheless, we stuck to our guns and requested a fresh, rare steak;
- During this discourse the waitress had brought the salad. This comprised lettuce, tomato and cucumber. Completely uninspiring. We added this to our complaint and it was taken away with the steak;
- Fortunately the chef gave us priority and it was not too long before a new steak and salad arrived;
- The salad was the same one, dressed up with some onion, grated carrot and a dressing;
- The steak was fine although the vegetables (original ones provided with the first steak) did suffer from being reheated;
- Another waitress arrived at 8pm, presumably the start of her regular shift;
- The Manageress continued to hover around the dining room, barking instructions to the 2 waitress and occasionally picking up dirty plates and rushing away with them at top speed;
- No doubt she thought she was being efficient but it had a very unsettling effect on us. We felt uncomfortable and under pressure to eat our food at the same speed she was rushing about;

- Deserts were ordered as a ‘treat’ for the mediocre main course. We should have known better;
- Both deserts were of the pre-made frozen variety and were tasteless and disappointing;
- Waited nearly 15 minutes after finishing desert for the bill and a further 5 before Melinda returned to collect the signed credit card slip.

### **Summary:**

- Dinner was another disappointment because of:
  - Poor menu choice;
  - Poor quality of food;
  - No home cooking;
  - Poor service;
  - Uninspiring surroundings;
  - Poor response to complaint;
  - Feeling of being rushed.

The solutions are self evident but radical as changes are needed in almost every area. Nonetheless, a good chef and trained staff in adequate numbers would go a long way to improving the situation. (Note however that we did not see the kitchens and therefore cannot comment on what changes might be needed to support these other initiatives.)

### **BAR (☆)**

- Small bar was smoky and more like a dockside tavern than a hotel bar;
- Most occupants were not residents;
- We managed to speak briefly to one couple (also staying in the hotel) who were waiting for some friends before going out to eat;
- Their experience of the hotel was similar to ours;
- They had originally booked for 2 nights but had decided to move on in the morning;
- We noted a disco set up in one corner and congratulated ourselves on the decision to insist on another room;
- Although we stayed in the bar for an hour, the smell, ambience and uncomfortable seating eventually got the better of us and we went for a walk around the town instead.

There was very little to recommend the bar. It was smoky, the decoration unappealing and the seats hard and uncomfortable. The clientele were out of place in a hotel bar although we accept the surroundings may have suited them. One consolation was that the barman was friendly, quick and efficient.

### **NIGHT'S SLEEP (☆)**

- Although the night was still relatively young, with no bath to soak in and a TV so

small that it was a strain to watch, we decided on an early night;

- At 6' 3", a partner and a small bed (we are spoiled with an American Kingsize bed at home) we were not anticipating a relaxing night's sleep;
- The overly soft mattress (seemingly more by age than design) also suggested this was likely;
- Our predictions proved correct;
- We were both cold in the night but could not coax the heating unit to produce any warmth;
- City traffic noise, which we are not used to, until half past midnight also proved disturbing but did then quieten down significantly until 7:30am;
- Single glazing did nothing to help either the temperature or the noise;
- The early morning call, booked for 8am came 10 minutes early, the message was pre-recorded so lacked any personal touch;
- The shower was a pitiful drizzle with the temperature varying wildly and frequently. It proved necessary to step out from under the flow on 2 occasions as the water reached unacceptably high temperatures;
- The towels were barely adequate for the job.

Many people do not sleep well in a strange bed and many people, especially those on holiday, are looking for something special, different to that which they can experience at home. To this end, we believe that a good bed can make or break a person's opinion about a hotel. Mattresses should be of a high quality, even in the least expensive establishments and preferably the biggest available. Heating and plumbing are frequently very poor in the UK's older hotels but we feel money invested in these areas is money well spent; particularly for overseas visitors. A limp shower will create sufficient adverse comment amongst our European and American visitors that neither they, nor their friends, will return. There is no excuse for early or late wake-up calls or the pitifully small and thin excuses for towels. Pampered customers will return, others will not.

## **BREAKFAST (☆☆)**

- Greeted by a young, fresh faced waitress called Amy who asked for our room number and showed us to a table;
- She explained that cereals and juices were self service but she would bring anything cooked and our tea or coffee;
- We ordered full English and decaffeinated coffee;
- A reasonable choice of packet cereals were available but there was nowhere for the empty packets;
- Milk was not marked so we did not know if we were drinking skimmed, semi-skimmed or full fat milk. Amy did not know either but later told us it was 'normal' milk.
- There was no fruit or yoghurt on offer but those preferring a continental breakfast did have a small choice of 2 meats and 2 cheeses;
- We spotted a toaster and so put a couple of slices in for ourselves. This turned out to be wise as Amy was serving on her own and did not have the capacity to make the guests toast for them;
- The main breakfast was not too bad, slightly greasy and not the best quality bacon or

sausage but, apart from the piece of fried bread, we enjoyed it;

- We suspect the coffee was caffeinated but did not question it;
- Amy happily brought us a pot of tea as well when asked;
- The dining room was never busy but Amy coped well and provided a bright and cheery start to our day.

Expectations were not running high by breakfast time so we were a little taken aback but pleasantly surprised by the ease, quality and friendly service we received. Not that there was anything outstanding or special in what we received but it did go to show that it does not take a lot of effort to provide a reasonable basic level of service. We would have preferred more choice and a bin for the rubbish but otherwise we were satisfied.

## **DEPARTURE (☆)**

- Our check-out from the hotel proved to be a summary of our stay;
- The receptionist (not seen before) had made little effort with her own appearance and came across as flustered even though we were the only people at the desk;
- She had to search under piles of papers to find a stapler and then it was empty, which she promptly blamed on the night shift;
- She never really looked at us except when she asked if we had enjoyed our stay. I wrinkled my nose but did not say anything to see what response it would bring. It brought none so I decided that the hotel was not really interested in any comments we might have to make;
- The print of the final bill was very faint; a new ribbon/cartridge was definitely needed in the printer;
- The receptionist said ‘Thank you’ but made no other comments to wish us a good day or make conversation. So we left.

A guest’s departure is the final chance an hotel has to learn something from its guests so that it can improve. Regrettably, it is an opportunity that too few take advantage of. Reception, as the last (and often the first) point of human contact with the customer it is important to create the right impression. Hotel Letdown did everything wrong, from the difficulty in finding the reception desk in the first place to the untidiness of the desk and the staff. A big improvement is needed here, starting with recruiting the right staff and training them to deliver the levels of service expected by customers.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

Our final frustration came when we reached our car to find that somebody had parked so close to the driver’s door that we could not get in. I chanced asking the receptionist if she knew who owned the car and whether they were up yet. “Oh that’s mine” she said. “Sorry, I was in a bit of a hurry this morning. Hang on and I’ll move it for you.”

## **CONCLUSIONS (☆)**

Hotel Letdown was one of the most disappointing hotels we have stayed in. Many Bed & Breakfasts, One Star and Two Star hotels offer a better atmosphere and superior levels of service and comfort. Whilst there is no doubt that the hotel needs financial investment in terms of its décor and furniture, the real problem comes from the staff. At all levels they simply do not think

about the customers and how they could improve their stay.

We were specifically asked to evaluate one manageress but we feel the problem goes much deeper than just one individual. If the other managers were not of similar character, then we would not have seen untidy reception desks, mismatched furniture and so on. Different shifts may mean new faces but the standards presented to the customer should be consistent.

On a more positive note, the barman and young waitress, Amy, did bring a smile to our face and should be congratulated for their efforts. More staff of this calibre are needed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are made:

- Hotel Letdown needs the personal attention of the owners or a very good manager;
- Changes need to be supported by financial investment;
- Web site needs to be designed and written to a much higher standard;
- Consideration should be given to changing the pricing policy to charge per room and not per person;
- Higher quality of staff are needed (this will mean paying higher salaries);
- Initial and on-going staff training in hospitality, customer care, etc is needed;
- Old furniture and ornaments need to be thrown out;
- New Information Packs are required;
- A designer should be commissioned to suggest style and colour themes for the hotel;
- All new redecoration and furniture should fit in with the agreed styles and colours;
- The public areas, lobby, reception, dining room and bar need particular and immediate attention (even to the extent of redecorating the dining room again to fit in with the new theme);
- The exterior of the hotel needs brightening up and kept clean;
- The car park needs resurfacing and the entrance into the hotel needs to be clearly marked;
- Varied, high quality, freshly cooked food must be served in the restaurant to complement the hotel's 3 star rating;
- Menus need to be professionally redesigned so that they are readable and fit with the theme;
- Vegetarian options should be offered;
- The hotel bar should be refurnished and made into a no smoking area to encourage its use by hotel guests;
- The spare attic room should be converted for use by the masseuse;
- Plumbing should be improved to provide powerful showers with plentiful supplies of water at a constant temperature;
- Decent quality towels should be provided;
- Rooms need to be assessed and if necessary modified to provide a balance between bathroom and living space;

- Double glazing is required in all bedrooms;
- Decent beds, mattresses, TV and furniture need to be provided.