

Heritage hotels: An exploration of staff experiences in these unique hospitality environments

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Abstract

Heritage hotels play a significant role in the hotel sector, preserving cultural heritage and delivering authentic and unique guest experiences and economic value to destinations. As such, they are an important but under-researched hotel operation. They range in size and star rating and can be boutique and/or upscale luxury hotels, independently owned and operated or managed by one of the large international hotel chains. There are three types of heritage hotels: original, simulated, and converted. The first are hotels whose purpose has remained unchanged since their inception and, despite modernization, retain their originality. The second are simulated heritage hotels, which are associated with symbolic heritage elements. The third are historic structures (castles, cathedrals, palaces, etc.) that have been repurposed and converted into hotels, imbuing them with new symbolic and economic meanings. This research note investigates the third type of heritage hotels. These are buildings rich in history, a sense of place and hold cultural meanings for their localities and communities. The note employs an exploratory, qualitative research strategy and reports data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 customer-facing employees and managers in three independently owned and operated United Kingdom (UK) rural boutique heritage hotels. This qualitative approach provided an opportunity to attain depth in revealing the participants' service experiences and encounters. The research note advances extant scholarship, which has examined employee interactions in small heritage accommodations as emotional and individualised guest experiences. It suggests that historic sites repurposed as heritage hotels have distinctive qualities, setting them apart from other hotels as hospitality environments. As such, their staff regard themselves as stewards and storytellers of local culture as much as receptionists, servers, etc. It concludes by advancing possibilities for further research on this conceptualization of heritage hotel employees.

Keywords

Servicescapes, emotional labour, employees, stewardship, storytelling, authenticity

Introduction

Heritage hotels intertwine cultural authenticity with contemporary hospitality, offering a unique and immersive experience. These hotels typically attract tourists interested in visiting and staying in historic places (Naguib, 2008; Chhabra, 2010) and can often be considered as heritage attractions in their own right (Chhabra, 2015), providing revenue and direct and indirect

employment opportunities for their local communities (Henderson, 2011; Ghaderi et al., 2020). Whilst scholars

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have investigated the experiential (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005), aesthetic (Lim and Endean, 2009), and built heritage (Henderson, 2013) attributes of boutique and heritage (Xie and Shi, 2020; Buhagiar et al., 2023) hotels, the latter remain an under-researched type of hotel operation. Heritage hotels range in size and star rating and can be boutique or large luxury hotels (Aggett, 2007; Henderson, 2011; Sala, 2018), independently owned and operated or managed by one of the large international hotel chains (Lim and Endean, 2009; Henderson, 2013; Lee and Chhabra, 2015). Their room rates typically fall within the middle and upper price bands (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005; Henderson, 2011, 2013) and they fall into three types: original, simulated, and converted. The first are hotels whose purpose has remained unchanged since their inception and, despite renovations, retain their original character (Xie and Shi, 2020), such as the Savoy Hotel in London. The second are simulated heritage hotels and designed as a ‘genuine fake’ (Xie and Shi, 2020) to mimic a heritage experience for contemporary hotel guests (Goulding, 2000).

This research note evaluates the third type of heritage hotels, buildings rich in history, a sense of place and cultural meanings to their localities and communities. They are historic structures (castles, palaces, forts, manor houses, etc.), whose original purpose was not lodging and have been converted into hotels, imbuing them with new symbolic and economic meanings (Naguib, 2008; Chhabra, 2015; Xie and Shi, 2020). Preserving and restoring these historic landmarks can provide opportunities for creating a distinctive location and a marketing brand for tourist destinations (Henderson, 2011; Elshaer et al., 2022), as the Raffles Hotel has done in Singapore (Thirumaran et al., 2023). The authenticity of these hotels and the stories told of them is perhaps less important than their appeal since authenticity is subjective and we all have our own perceptions of an experience (Robinson and Clifford, 2012). Furthermore, there are different versions of authenticity (Ning, 2017). It can be existential (Rickly-Boyd, 2013), stimulated (Lovell and Hitchmough, 2020) or socio-spatial (Szmigin et al., 2017), so that we connect experiences with the place in which they occur. Ultimately, hotel guests will make up their own minds over the authenticity of an individual heritage hotel.

This research note employs an exploratory, qualitative research strategy and reports data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 employees and managers in three heritage hotels in rural Wales, the United Kingdom. It seeks to confirm the work of McIntosh and Siggs (2005) on the emotional and individualised guest interactions offered by hosts in small heritage accommodations. Replication of findings is valuable in itself as it provides a cumulative process that

develops a corpus of knowledge for theory-building in hospitality research (Khan, 2019). However, the research note does also seek to deepen understanding of heritage hotels and their potential impact on employee and guest experiences, tourism, and community engagement. Its particular contribution is to discuss how historic sites repurposed as heritage hotels have qualities, which set them apart from other hotels. As such, their guest-facing staff regard themselves as local cultural stewards and storytellers as much as receptionists, servers, etc. It concludes by advancing possibilities for further research on this aspect of staff-guest interaction.

Literature review

Converted heritage hotels can be small, independent boutique establishments (Aggett, 2007; Lim and Endean, 2009) or large hotels offering luxury facilities and service (Henderson, 2013; Lu et al., 2015). What they have in common is they enable guests to stay in lodgings with a unique heritage (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005; Lee and Chhabra, 2015; Hussein and Hapsari, 2020; Periañez-Cristobal et al., 2020). They are historic structures (castles, palaces, forts, manor houses, etc.), rich in history and local cultural meanings (Chhabra, 2015; Quadri-Felitti et al., 2022) and are often tourist attractions in their own right (Naguib, 2008). Repurposed and converted, they are “a lodging establishment with historical significance and experiential authenticity of heritage, where tangible signifiers such as architectural features, historical characteristics, and cultural identities are ostensibly available for public consumption” (Xie and Shi, 2020: 3).

Heritage hotels are rich in history (Henderson et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2013); their stories evoke emotional connections in guests and arouse feelings of pride and place attachment in local communities (Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Hussein and Hapsari, 2020; Thirumaran, et al., 2023). Guests find their unique architectural style, décor, interior design, furniture, and bedroom styles appealing (Naguib, 2008; Abd Elghani, 2012; Henderson, 2013; Xie and Shi, 2020). Moreover, representing the past in the present promotes place engagement, and improves guest experiences and their intentions to return (Bryce et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015). Recounting stories from the past and storytelling itself have become powerful and convenient vehicles in tourism, place and hospitality communication strategies (Ben Youssef et al., 2019) and can connect contemporary tourists and guests to an imagined or sanitised past (Light, 2017). In addition to their tangible heritage attributes, such hotels typically offer high-quality, personalised service (Aggett, 2007; Lim and Endean, 2009) and it was these guest interactions that

Table 1. Study participant profiles.

Participant no.	Type of employment	Position	Gender	Heritage hotel experience (years)
P1	Permanent/full time	General manager	Female	3
P2	Permanent/full time	HR manager	Female	5
P3	Permanent/full time	Reception manager	Male	4
P4	Permanent/full time	F&B manager	Female	9
P5	Permanent/full time	Reception manager	Female	1
P6	Permanent/full time	General manager	Male	22
P7	Permanent/full time	Assistant general manager	Male	13
P8	Permanent/full time	Recreational manager	Male	17
P9	Permanent/full time	Duty manager	Male	23
P10	Permanent/full time	Reception manager	Female	8
P11	Permanent/full time	Employee (guest services)	Female	1
P12	Permanent/full time	Employee (guest services)	Female	1
P13	Permanent/full time	Employee (guest services)	Female	1
P14	Permanent/full time	Employee (guest services)	Female	1
P15	Permanent/full time	Employee (guest services)	Female	1
P16	Permanent/full time	Employee (server)	Female	2

our study sought to explore in more detail. McIntosh and Siggs (2005) have already suggested that hosts in small heritage accommodations typically offer emotional, individualised, “homey,” and “exclusive” guest experiences. Our study sought to confirm and advance this work by asking employees and managers how they negotiate and navigate the heritage aspects of these hotels as hospitality environments.

Methodology

The study employed an exploratory, qualitative research strategy and reports data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 customer-facing employees and managers in three independently owned and operated heritage hotels in rural Wales. The hotels are all boutique-style, have a small number of rooms (six to 29) and excel in hospitality (evidenced by prestigious industry awards). The rack rate of these hotels is GB£136-230 per room per night, exclusive of breakfast, and all offer fine dining restaurants. We decided on a qualitative research approach since it provided an opportunity to attain a fine-grained analysis of the participants’ views and opinions (Creswell, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to recruit respondents, with the criteria being full-time employees and managers who have direct guest contact, all of whom are likely to have different perspectives on employee-guest interactions. Eleven of our sample were female and five male and ranged from managers (10) to employees (6) (Table 1). Whilst a sample size of 15 to 20 respondents is ideal for qualitative

research (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2013), the number of interviews was not predetermined. After 16 interviews we had a good sense that the amount of new data was diminishing to a point where we could confidently say saturation had been reached since the last two interviews did not add substantially to the body of information collected (Guest et al., 2020).

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Key phrases in the data were used to identify the characteristics and potential experiential dimensions of heritage hotels as described by participants. According to the thematic analysis procedure, the transcripts were also analysed to assemble and categorise text segments representing themes constructed from the participants’ accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Careful reading and re-reading of the data identified key themes that were important for describing the phenomenon under investigation, which then became the categories for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). It should be noted that since the purpose of the analysis was to explore and reveal themes related to the subject matter, the results described in the following section are not presented in relative frequencies (Nowell et al., 2017). It is comparable to a thematic network that seeks to delve into the meaning of the texts and identify the underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Findings and discussion

The employees and managers were proud of the hotels’ histories before they were converted into lodgings.

They described how they were keen to relate their stories to guests and spoke in the interviews of the importance of preserving and protecting the buildings. They were very aware of the inimitable heritages of the three hotels, including their original features, artworks, antique furniture, unique architecture, and the overall historical significance of the hotels as buildings in their localities (as a castle, a former windmill, and a former priory). Pictures, pottery vases, handmade textiles and carpets, antique furniture and even an ancient stone staircase were all mentioned as examples of what makes each hotel unique. Participants all elaborated on how their histories makes each individual hotel one-of-a-kind:

- P12: "It's a hotel with history, and it has a place in the area, and it is something [which] should be preserved..."*
- P1: "Here everything is slightly different, the shape of the rooms, layout, and the art and everything else makes us totally different to other hotels."*
- P14: "It's a big fusion of the old, historic, and the original features, and then obviously the new modern art side of things as well."*
- P4: "The state-of-the-art design of the building, the picture rails, and the fact that we still have the whole lot in the old part of the hotel, including the old-fashioned staircase, which gives it a heritage appeal, are all impressive."*

The interviewees, both managers and employees, all derive a noticeable sense of pride from working in hotels, which are so distinct from others. Their pride can be seen in the ways they are keen to share the hotels' histories and stories with guests, the ways they describe the hotels as prestigious historical environments, and how, by simply working there, they gain respect from the local communities, since these hotels are so woven into the local landscape and its identity:

- P11: "To be fair, it's nice to be able to look after something old and to be enjoyed the way it is. I do love working here for its history and everything."*
- P14: "Where are you working now? [XXX hotel]. Everybody's heard of it, everyone knows. As soon as you say, 'I'm working at [XXX hotel]', they are like, 'Ooh!' It's definitely well-known as an establishment in the local area."*
- P12: "You feel like you're a part of something when it's a heritage hotel, especially when you do the rooms because the rooms are so old, you just take a lot more pride in it."*

These findings confirm and augment previous studies, which suggest that converted heritage hotels offer a unique hospitality environment and experience for both guests and employees/hosts (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005; Lim and Endean, 2009; Henderson et al., 2013; Xie and Shi, 2020; Thirumaran, et al., 2023). In particular, our conversations with employees and managers support the notion that the tangible and intangible characteristics and historical aspects of heritage hotels represent an important additional dimension in establishing their individuality (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005; Aggett, 2007; Chittiprolu et al., 2021). Like countless boutique and upscale hotels, many heritage hotels prioritise guest experiences, and aim to provide a warm welcome, and outstanding and personalised service. This does not make them distinctive. In addition, however, the staff interviewed at the converted heritage hotels participate in what they perceive to be interactions that enable guests to connect on a highly personal level with the local people and culture through the built heritage of the hotel. These findings echo those of McIntosh and Siggs (2005) and Lim and Endean (2009) as they confirm that experiencing a personal relationship with one's hosts is an essential aspect of heritage accommodation. In addition, it exemplifies how stories from the past and storytelling can be powerful and compelling tools in hospitality communication strategies (Ben Youssef et al., 2019), connecting contemporary guests to an imagined past (Light, 2017).

Conclusion

This study's contribution to deepening hospitality research is to suggest that those who work in heritage hotels may have an emotional connection with these distinctive, repurposed buildings rich in history and stories that are rooted in and respected by their local communities. It is this sense of stewardship which may make working in converted heritage hotels different from working in other types of accommodations. The study suggests that some staff take pride in working in these heritage hotels because of their local cultural and historical significance and the respect in which they are held by the local communities. As such, the study contributes to the literature on the experiential dimensions of heritage hotels and identifies an area deserving further investigation. This insight is valuable for managers and hoteliers as it helps them understand how their employees relate to their working environments and derive work satisfaction.

Whilst the study deepens understanding of the experiential dimensions of heritage hotels, like any research, it has limitations. It focused on front-of-house managers and employees and recent research (Efthymiou, 2018; Efthymiou et al., 2020) has examined the experiential dimensions of back-of-house

employees. Future investigations could explore the perspectives of back-of-house employees in heritage hotel settings across a range of contexts. The current study also only focused on converted boutique heritage hotels under independent management (Henderson, 2013; Lim and Endean, 2009). Further research is required to explore how employees' experiences may vary in original and simulated heritage hotels, in small and large hotels, and in multinational and independent hotels. Finally, this study collected data through the interview method, which was the most appropriate in this instance; future research may extend and deepen its insights using different methods.

Heritage hotels are not just ordinary accommodations; they are living embodiments of local history, culture, and tradition. The staff who work in these establishments, especially the smaller operations, play a crucial role in preserving and showcasing the rich heritage they represent. By understanding their experiences and delving deeper into the challenges, rewards, and overall satisfaction of being a manager or an employee working in heritage hotels, we can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of the hospitality industry and its impact on employees, guests and communities. We need more studies, which explore the various aspects of work in heritage hotels, including the unique challenges faced by employees, such as maintaining and negotiating the historical fabric of the building while meeting contemporary guest expectations. A particularly rich avenue of investigation could also be the personal rewards and fulfilment staff may derive from playing a part in preserving and sharing cultural heritage, particularly through storytelling. Such insights will help shed light on the factors that contribute to employee satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being. This knowledge can be invaluable for hotel management, policymakers, trade unions, and researchers seeking to understand and enhance the working conditions and experiences of employees in this industry.

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