You might try an 'alternative' hotel to save some money. But hopefully you've picked a hotel where the bed bugs don't bite.

BY RON FURLONG

Under no uncertain circumstances do I consider myself a money waster or excessive, especially when it comes to spending my boss' money. However, it has been my usual tradition over the years to stay at a four-star hotel when attending the Golf Industry Show. I justify this with four main rationales:

- One, the hotels closest to the convention centers tend to be the nicer hotels in most cities.
- Two, I hate traveling and thus, when I have to, I like to do it with as much comfort as possible.
- Three, because most of my colleagues and friends tend to stay at the nicer hotels, networking can really only be done from these places.
- And four, as I spend almost the entire year watching my spending and saving where I can here and there, it's nice just to treat one's self once a year.

But this year — considering the sour economy, how much money we spent on fuel and fertilizers last year and knowing that rounds are down across the country (including at my own course) — I figured I'd shop around for a hotel in New Orleans.

Can't hurt, right? I'm sure my boss would appreciate it. So instead of automatically choosing between the Embassy Suites, the Sheraton or the nearest Hilton, I thought I'd spend an afternoon on the Internet and see what I could find in the "alternative" hotel area.

The first thing I discovered is that many of the hotels and motels use the same descriptions. Terms like "quiet," "clean," "comfortable" and "affordable" are commonplace. You wouldn't believe how many places consider their hotels to be charming.
or historic. It didn’t take long for me to learn of what terms and descriptions to be wary.

After visiting the Web sites of the hotels themselves, I began reading some customer reviews about these places. It was interesting to read some reviews and then go back again and look at the descriptions. It became fairly obvious to me what some of the descriptions actually meant, if you read between the lines a little bit.

So, as you make your hotel reservations for the show, as well as any other travels, I’ve compiled a top-10 list of the descriptions of which to be suspicious:

10. Great amenities
9. Charming
8. Nostalgic
7. Unique
6. Conveniently located
5. Unforgettable
4. Historic charm
3. We welcome pets
2. Best prices in town
1. Affordable luxury

They all sound good, don’t they? Book me a room! But here is my take on what each of these descriptions actually means:

10. Great amenities. This is really similar to saying to somebody you’re trying to fix up him up with a girl who is not all that attractive. “Well, she has a great personality.”
9. Charming. This is another word for small.
8. Nostalgic. This means old and smells a little.
6. Conveniently located. This means there’s nothing better to say about it.
5. Unforgettable. Trust me, you want to forget a hotel stay, not remember it.
3. We welcome pets. HOOOOOWWWWWWLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!!!!!!
2. Best prices in town. Another way to say, “You probably don’t want to bring your children.”
1. Affordable luxury. This means scary.

In fairness, sometimes charming actually means charming. Sometimes conveniently located is not a bad thing. Sometimes the best prices in town do not equate to “you might want to pack a firearm.” The trick is, how we go about figuring out when someone really means charming and not, “The room is the size of a walk-in closet?” Or how do we know when something really is nostalgic as opposed to simply outdated, old and smelly?

Visiting each hotel to see if it is up to par is, obviously, not an option. What we have, instead, in this wonderful age of technology, is online customer reviews. They are positively essential. Simply put, you can’t trust the establishment itself. Without a doubt, the Bates Motel would have advertised itself as charming; best prices around; historic; discount for room No. 1! (“Front desk? Yes, sorry to be a bother, but my shower curtain is ripped. You’ll be right over? Great. What wonderful customer service!”

Did you see the Luke Wilson/Kate Beckensale horror movie “Vacancy”? Now they should have checked the customer reviews beforehand. Would have saved them a lot of trouble! How about the John Cusack movie “Room 1408?” (“The hotel was lovely and historic, and the room itself spacious and decorated beautifully, but I would give it a thumbs down due to the haunting and the ghosts.”) Come to think of it, there are an alarming number of movies that are centered around this very topic. How about “The Shining” (“Here’s Johnny!”)? Or, if not movies about haunted hotels or motels, then movies where very bad things happen in hotels or motels. The Viggo Mortenson movie “A History of Violence” and the Oscar winner “No Country For Old Men” come to mind. Ooohhh, gives me the shivers!

Seriously, though, there are a number of Web sites dedicated to customer reviews or simply “experience sharing” that are invaluable. Expedia.com; Tripadvisor.com; Travelpost.com and even Hotels.com are all good sites for finding out just which places are the steals and which places might steal from you.

One thing that surprised me when checking out reviews is that an unexpected number of reviews were of the positive nature. I would

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have thought that the people who take the time to write about a stay or an experience would do so because of some bad experience or poor customer service that they had. So, hats off to the people who actually write some positive and helpful feedback. If everything you read was negative, then the information would be mostly useless.

The negative reviews are, of course, much more fun to read. And I must say a strong negative review will steer you away from a place much more than a glowing positive review will make you book a reservation. Here’s a sampling of a few of the, well, shall we say, more negative comments:

“When my Mum used to tell me every night, ‘Don’t let the bed bugs bite,’ I realize now she must have stayed at this hotel once. Ouch!”

“The hotel was noisy and scary. There was used soap in the shower.”

“After killing several large cockroaches, we called the front desk. The man hesitated and then he told me he’d call right back. He never did. I killed four more, and then we decided to sleep with the light on. I didn’t sleep but two hours. I guess I just passed out somehow. When I woke up I killed two more and had a big welt on my leg that itched.”

“The room reeked of Indian spices and what must have been barbecued goat. The Internet consisted of two wires that came out of opposite walls, leading to cables all over the floor that didn’t even connect. Also, during the ENTIRE night there was a steady, light tapping on the wall behind our headboard. A call to the front desk did nothing to stop it. Scared the crap out of me and I couldn’t sleep.”

(The following person is responding to a previous reviewer mentioning the motel was located in a hard-to-find spot and called the location a bit of a maze.)

“It’s a maze all right. A-Mazing you get out of this area in one piece!”

These reviews, though definitely negative, are not the norm. For the most part, reviews tend to be positive and helpful and give you a good indication of whether it is a place you want to stay.

Based on some very helpful and insightful customer reviews, I’m planning to secure a reservation at a nice three-star hotel, saving a little money for my boss, but not saving quite so much that I’d be staying at a place with used soap in the bathroom or a light tapping on the wall all night. I’ll see how it goes.

Who knows? Next year I’ll probably be back at the Hilton, but at least I gave it the old college try.

And with that I bid you a pleasant good night. Don’t let the bed bugs bite!

Furlong, golf course superintendent of the Avalon Golf Club in Bellingham, Wash., likes to go to sleep in hotels with ESPN on the television at a low volume.