

The *Mountain Review* is not commonly known for hotel reviews. However a recent commercial featuring a prominent businessman and politician sparked memories for me of a disappointing check-in some time ago. The candidate spoke of state supported facilities which offer amenities I was previously unaware of. I didn't even know the state had taken over the resort industry. But with the Fed managing banking, healthcare, real estate and airlines, I imagine anything is possible.

As you can probably guess, my political leanings tend toward the red side of the isle. The world often labels me a "conservative," but I believe "God fearing" is more accurate. Besides, are convicted felons really members of any political party? I doubt it. Nevertheless, in true Tea Party style everybody's comments are subject to fact checking. So in the interest of full disclosure let's review the level of comfort a guest of the state can expect.

#### A GREAT PLACE TO VISIT?

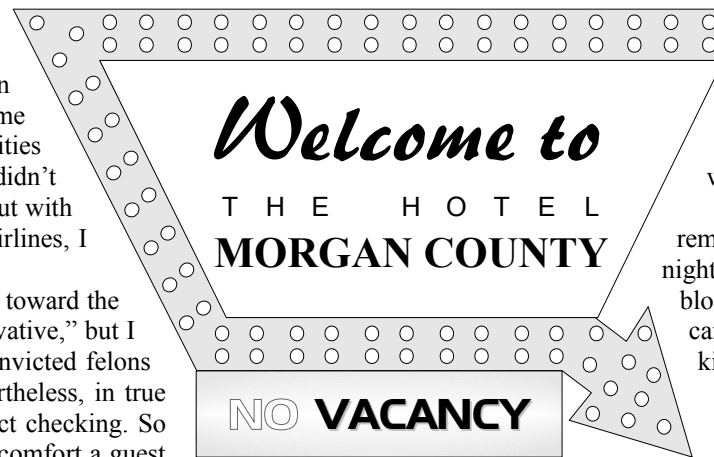
As the shuttle bus pulled onto the property I was immediately impressed with the scenic view of the valley. This 500,000-square-foot, 2,200-bed property is nestled in the rolling hills just outside Frozen Head State Park. Whoever picked this sight to build should be commended, as the area is visually stunning. My hopes for a relaxing stay were soon dashed nonetheless, as the bus pulled past the lobby and headed for a rear gate.

There was no bellboy to meet me at the service entrance and my luggage was abruptly presented to me from a pile on the asphalt. My bags and I were soon separated again as I was given a brief preview of the accommodations. The sample room was exceptionally small, roughly 6' x 11', and they called it "a double." I figured it wouldn't be too bad as I was traveling alone. I can't imagine how two people could possibly spend any amount of time in such a small space.

The staff soon fetched me and proceeded to rifle through my bags. I had previously visited a county facility, and they seemed miffed that I had taken the towels. Soon my bags were much lighter, and I was presented with whites and a green vinyl bag full of ticking. I assumed housekeeping and maintenance must have been on strike, as I have never stayed at any hotel where the guest had to lug their own linens, towels, luggage and a six-foot-long bag of stuffing to their suite.

After the quarter-mile hike to my accommodations, I realized that the front desk had neglected to present me with a key. I piled my stuff in the floor outside my room and surveyed the other guests. A rough looking group. I was a little uncomfortable leaving my luggage unattended, but I didn't think I could lug it another step if I tried. Luckily, there was a small management office near my room and they furnished me with an access key.

As I entered the econo-suite I was shocked to learn it had been double-booked. There was already a guest crammed into the closet-sized space. Exhausted from my trip and the long list of disappointments I had encountered, I was in no shape to complain. Resolving never again to make travel plans based on a campaign ad, I drug my property into the



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room and closed the door.

All the furniture in the living quarters was made of metal and the bed had no springs. Following the example of the guest who had checked in before me, I hoisted my weighty bag of ticking onto the sheet metal base. It was now clear that this was supposed to serve as a mattress.

I was happy to see that the room had a TV and that the remote wasn't attached to the nightstand. In fact there was no nightstand at all, only a metal table bolted onto the opposite block wall. I soon learned too that neither the TV or remote came with the room, they were both sold separately. What kind of hotel is this anyway?

Just then I remembered that beautiful scenic view. TV or no, I could always drift away into that gorgeous backdrop. Cutting my eyes toward the light source another blow to my plans was landed. Someone, obviously not concerned with customer satisfaction, had frosted glass installed in the room's only window. Not only that, but the silly thing wouldn't open, just a small panel at the bottom cranked out. I tried to get down low enough to look out with no luck. I sure could use a drink. Where's the mini-bar?

The other doubled-booked guest, my reluctant roomy for this stay, soon came in and gave me the low-down on the beverage situation. He showed me his drink fridge, a small 5 qt. cooler, another prepay amenity – drinks not included. Of course I checked in some-time ago. Now the coolers are being fazed-out and new guests can't even get a bucket. A plastic bag of ice stuck in the sink is the best new patrons can hope for. Not only that but it's a dry resort, nothing stronger than a Pepsi cola on the grounds. It's hard to believe this place keeps any customers at all, but for some reason it's always full. Must be the advertising.

Having recently experienced a reversal of fortunes, I knew the small print expenses were well beyond my reach. My bad decisions and ill-advised actions had secured me an extended reservation but left me financially destitute. The management stepped in to help, providing me a laundry job at 17¢ an hour. All I had to do was wash and fold the clothes of the other guests five days a week. For only 942 hours of work I could own that \$160, 13" TV offered by the single vendor to the guest. Another 53 hours would get me the remote, 82 hours for a 12" stationary fan. What I was told were amenities turned out to be products in the company store. Talk about bait and switch!

#### YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO LIVE HERE

This satirical review could go on for many pages as comparing the "luxuries" of prison life to those offered in a hotel or motel is more absurd than this publication is thick. Morgan County itself is a four-star prison, but it doesn't vaguely resemble a hotel – either in form, function or purpose. Most of us are here for years on end, not just a weekend ... not for a vacation. There is no wy-fi, no Internet, no Xbox on my 13" TV and no premium

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# Hotel

*From 02*

or pay-preview channels. I can't even buy a cassette or CD player. And if you think we eat too well, stop by the Quick-chill plant in Nashville and ask for a sample of the square fish, chuck wagon or chili con carne. Of course to get the full effect you'll need an inmate to cook it for you.

All that being said, I want you to know that I'm not complaining about prison, or even being in prison. It is what it is, and unfortunately it is a necessary part of human society. I consider myself lucky to be here. I'm thankful that Western culture puts such a high value on human life and that the idea of redemption under-girds this country's foundation. But redemption requires repentance, and repentance starts on the inside and works its way out.

Prison reform, like that of the individual, must also come from within. The dedicated men and women with "boots on the ground" need to be the ones making the call. They can see firsthand what works and what does not. They know the character and nature of the prisoners they work with, 90% of whom will return to society right here in the U.S. In that respect the stakes in this industry are somewhat higher than in Iraq or Afghanistan. Cutting off funding to your troops doesn't work, at home or abroad.

Prison works on the premise that punishment prompts change. I've il-

lustrated just a very few of the immediate hardships inmates encounter, along with the separation from family, friends, technology, resources, society in general and the micro-management of their every move. But correction only works when punishment is accompanied with instruction as to the proper course. Any good parent can tell you that, and Tennessee has apparently taken this lesson to heart. This state's recidivism rate (38%) is much lower than the national average (78%), due in large part to its prison programs.

To believe that our government can reform individuals by neglect is as irrational as believing it can do a better job than the markets in deciding what businesses stay open and which ones close. Failure is failure on both the corporate and individual level. Prisoners and prison programs alike must be held to the same standard. Prisoner participation in programs must be tested by retention of the relevant facts, programs by the effect on the prisoner. Either not making the grade must be cut. We can only afford savings in this system by eliminating the programs and policies that do not work and avoiding wasting resources on those prisoners who refuse to.

Politicians can no more run corrections from the executive office than they can run healthcare from the White House. The best state government can do is make better ways to gauge reform when it does happen and then empower those individuals, both inmates and staff, who step up to the plate. **MR**