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FITNESS

Room-service workouts

More hotels are catering to travelers too busy -- or too bashful -- to check out exercise rooms.

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Being on the road used to be a viable excuse for bailing on a workout. No gym, no safe place to run outdoors — no exercise.

But now there's little excuse for a routine going AWOL. Several hotel chains have added in-room fitness programs so guests can stay fit while traveling, and more are likely to follow, as fitness becomes a focus of hotels' ever-expanding amenities.

Among the offerings is Marriott hotels' Fit for You program, with three types of equipment (delivered to the room for free) that tone and strengthen. Hilton hotels provide a free in-room fitness kit and have teamed up with Bally Total Fitness so guests can work out with personal trainers in the hotel gym or the nearest Bally's. The Marriott chain and thousands of other hotels in the U.S. and Canada offer pay-per-view videos that include Pilates, yoga, cardio and stretch workouts.

These new plans are the product of savvy marketing and a societal move toward healthier living. Hotels offer amenities to give them an edge over the competition; at the same time messages about the importance of physical activity are everywhere as obesity rates rise. Airlines too have begun offering in-flight fitness programs for travelers.

"Anything we can do to promote people to be physically active, great," says Mike Bracko, a Canadian exercise physiologist and member of the American College of Sports Medicine. "We want people to have an opportunity to exercise in as comfortable a setting as possible."

The Hilton and Marriott chains say customer demand has partially driven their programs. A couple of years ago Marriott began upgrading some of its fitness centers, and in January the hotels started offering healthier restaurant choices. Nusrat Mirza, the hotels' regional director of operations, says that wasn't enough.

"Some people don't like to leave the room," he says. "I'm a busy traveler, and there are times when I don't have time to go down to the fitness center. And if people have kids with them, they can't leave the room and go work out."

Marriott's in-room exercise options, which have been available in full-service hotels for about a month, were created after scouring fitness trade shows and magazines. Michael Sena's Traveling Trainer is a small kit that includes elastic tubing bands for resistance training, plus a dining guide. The BodyWedge21 is a large foam wedge that allows users to do core and resistance training,

and the BodyRev is a hand-held piece of equipment that combines strength training with cardio exercise. All come with instructions, and videos are in the works.

In-room workouts might appeal to people who don't feel safe leaving the hotel to go to a local gym or even venturing solo to the hotel health club, which can be small and sparse. Alone in a hotel room, there's also no embarrassment factor. For that reason, Bracko thinks the in-room programs might appeal to novice exercisers as well, not just veterans who do anything to avoid missing one day of their workouts. (Bracko once ran up and down a hotel's stairwell to keep in shape.)

"What about the person who's been thinking about exercising, who says, 'Maybe I'll try this rubber band thing, or maybe I'll buy this pay-per-view yoga'? If there are more places that offer exercise, there are more opportunities for people to start an exercise program."

Hilton offers Bally trainers (for a fee of about \$50 to \$70 per hour) for guests who may need a little extra motivation. Says Jeanne Datz Rice, director of brand communication: "If you're not that disciplined, you have this option to maintain your fitness regimen."

Trainers will even go on runs with guests. The setup may also appeal to people curious about working with a personal trainer, adds Rice, "someone who may not have time at home, but who can carve out an hour while on the road."

The Zone Workout, available in some hotels via pay-per-view, offers programs in cardio stretching, total body workout, core conditioning, yoga and Pilates. They don't require any special equipment, just what's found in a hotel room: bed, chair, towel.

"What I really wanted to do was keep it simple," says Leah Garcia, the Boulder, Colo.-based trainer and former athlete who developed the program. "I don't want people to concern themselves with getting special equipment and stress about how to use this band."

The idea was born out of Garcia's own desire to stay fit while on the road: "I love working out in the weight room," she says, "but sometimes I'd be mentally and physically tired and welcomed the opportunity to have someone show me what to do. It occurred to me while I was in my hotel room doing abs and stretching: Wouldn't it be nice if someone were here right now training me?"

Sena, a Chicago-based personal trainer and fitness consultant who developed the kit used in Marriott's program, thinks the in-room programs will help counter physical activity's biggest enemy: lack of motivation. He's had to prep clients on how to research gyms while traveling so they'd keep up their workouts; now, he says, "The hospitality industry has started to catch up."