A Greener Night's Sleep: Best & Worst Hotel Chains

Brighter Planet study of 46,000 U.S. hotels shows going greener doesn't have to mean cutting your business and leisure travel

Price is no measure of the best and the worst performing hotel chains when it comes to energy efficiency and carbon footprints, according to a comprehensive new sustainability study of 46,000 U.S. hotels by Brighter Planet, a leading sustainability technology company.

Budget hotels beat out more expensive establishments overall on energy efficiency, but greater variation exists within the same class of hotels than between service classes. Some upscale hotels are more energy efficient than many midrange chains and some budget class options. But the analysis finds that informed travelers can significantly reduce their carbon footprints within every hotel price range.

"Going greener doesn't have to mean cutting your business or leisure travel," said Patti Prairie, Brighter Planet CEO. "Treating all hotels as equal incorrectly suggests that the only way to reduce lodging impacts is to reduce travel, but that obscures opportunities to lower your energy footprint and make big sustainability gains with smarter travel choices."

Brighter Planet's pioneering lodging analysis covers 80 percent of all U.S. hotels with at least 15 rooms, providing credible and user-friendly sustainability information on one of the most difficult segments of the travel industry to measure. The sustainability analytics company modeled the hotels' impacts using details on each unique property.

"Hotel efficiency is not about how much a room costs the consumer," said Prairie. "It's determined by the local climate, hotel energy sources, the cleanliness of its electric grid, as well as hotel amenities and the square footage per room."

According to Brighter Planet's estimates, the most energy and carbon efficient lodging chain in the U.S. is Vagabond Inns with Red Lion Hotels & Inns ranked No. 2. Both are midrange hotels. Red Carpet Inns, a budget chain, was third. Rounding out the top 10 most efficient chains are Travelodge, Scottish Inns, America's Best Inns & Suites, Shilo Inns & Resorts, Knights Inn, Howard Johnson and Rodeway Inn.

Budget chains rating highest in efficiency were Red Carpet Inns, Travelodge, and Scottish Inns. For midrange properties the winners were Vagabond Inns, Red Lion Hotels, and Shilo Inns & Resorts. At the luxury hotel level, the most energy-efficient were Four Points Sheraton, Disney Parks and Resorts, and Marriott Residence Inn.

The most energy efficient chain among upscale lodgings, Four Points Hotels by Sheraton, ranks 33rd when compared to all service classes. But the study also found that the Sheraton chain was 20% more energy efficient than the least efficient midrange chain, AmericInn International.

The upscale JW Marriott Hotels & Resorts bottomed out in last place, ranking 75th of the 75 chains analyzed.

The full report with the rankings of all 75 hotel chains can be seen at brighterplanet.com/research.

Travel carbon reporting is becoming an increasingly high priority for businesses, with 40 percent of all Global 500 companies now publicly reporting employee travel footprints. The hotel industry is also addressing sustainability issues more aggressively, with the number of LEED-certified hotels more than doubling in the past year and industry groups preparing to release official hotel carbon accounting guidelines.

Key findings in the report include:

- Energy and carbon per room-night varies tenfold among U.S. hotels. The dirtiest 25 percent of the nation's hotels are responsible for more than half of the entire industry's environmental impact, while the cleanest quarter of hotels represents just 7% of the lodging industry's energy and carbon footprint.

- Travel and sustainability managers can reduce footprints without cutting travel—and can dramatically improve the accuracy of sustainability reporting—by accounting for efficiency variability instead of assuming all hotel rooms are equal.

- Hotels are becoming less efficient. Newer hotels use significantly more energy per room-night than their older-vintage counterparts, and the energy they use is dirtier. A recent surge in interest in programs like LEED and Energy Star has the potential to reverse this trend.

- LEED and Energy Star hotel carbon calculations fall short for lodging industry sustainability accounting because they fail to take into account the number of rooms that are fit into a hotel. Measuring hotel energy use and emissions per room-night rather than per square foot is more relevant and actionable for business and travel managers.

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Brighter Planet is a leading sustainability technology company that helps businesses and clients operate more efficiently, conserve energy and save money. Brighter Planet was cited by the Environmental Protection Agency for developing one of the top five environmental apps in the U.S. in 2011. It was named Best Small Business of 2010 by Discovery Channel and received a Social Innovation Award from the Financial Times.

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