

Hotels making it easy for guests to exercise outdoors

By Nancy Trejos, USA Today

Chris McGinnis travels with just a carry-on bag, which leaves little room for running shoes.

When he wants to exercise during a trip, he takes long walks. He prefers burning calories while strolling through the Hudson River Park in New York or Runyon Canyon in Los Angeles. It's much nicer than running on a treadmill in a windowless hotel fitness room, he says.

"It's just good to be outdoors after spending so many hours in offices or on trade show floors full of stale air," says McGinnis, Best Western's business travel trends expert and a blogger at the company's travel site Youmustbetrippin.com.

The hotel fitness center has gotten fancier in recent years. But for many road warriors, that doesn't matter. They'd rather exercise in the great outdoors.

In a TripAdvisor survey of more than 1,400 U.S. travelers this year, 87 percent said walking is their primary exercise while traveling. Another 35 percent said they liked hiking, and 16 percent said they prefer biking.

In a bid to win those travelers, hotels are starting to give them exercise options beyond the fitness center. Many now offer walking tours and free bikes. Some have built outdoor areas for walking or running.

"There's clearly a group of travelers who like to work out in the gym and others who like to work out outside," says Chekitan Dev, associate professor of strategic marketing and brand management at Cornell University's School of Hotel

Administration. "Hotels are recognizing that travelers need choices."

Dev also points out that many hotels are getting better at taking advantage of their surroundings. "It's sort of short-sighted to think of the facilities that guests can access as being just within four walls," he says. "Hotels realize they have a bigger landscape to choose from."

There's some scientific evidence to support the theory that exercising outside may be better than in a gym. A 2008 Glasgow University poll of about 2,000 people found a 50 percent improvement in mental health among those who worked out outdoors.

And studies show that frequent travelers could use a lift. In a Harris Interactive poll released this year, 75 percent of 2,000 working Americans said too much travel for work caused them more stress.

"You're out of your normal element and surroundings, so even that can provide some level of stress," says Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise. "You're not sleeping in your own bed. You're not [following] your own routine as far as what you eat."

Exercising outdoors, he says, can help moderate that.

"The fresh air and the changing scenery and so forth can serve as an even greater positive distraction to forget the various care and trials of the day," he says.

Ted Mitchell, an engineer in Dallas, appreciates hotels that offer walking maps and other walking amenities. He tries to walk a couple of miles each night when he's on the road.

"I am inside buildings in conference rooms all day," he says. "Fresh air and being outside makes me feel like I am on vacation for a little while."

At select Home2 Suites properties, guests can take advantage of a walking path surrounding the buildings.

“We just heard the drumbeats really loudly about customers wanting to stay healthy on the road and wanting to go out and get a breath of fresh air,” says Bill Duncan, global head of brand management for Home2 Suites and Homewood Suites by Hilton. “They want a variety of different ways to exercise.”

The Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain north of Tucson, a Marriott property, offers a complimentary guided nature walk with one of their “rangers” every day. During the walk the rangers talk about the different types of plants and wildlife in the area and show participants ancient Indian petroglyphs. The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe provides maps for hikes that begin at the back doors of the property up to Sawmill Lake.

The Hotel Wolcott in Midtown Manhattan provides pedometers and walking maps at the front desk.

Affinia Hotels, which has properties in New York and Washington, D.C., offers guests a Walking Tour Kit that contains an iPod Shuffle or Nano loaded with Affinia Walking Tours and workout playlists, a City Walks deck of cards, a city guidebook, a map, pedometer and towel.

Some hotels are going so far as to give their guests a financial incentive to walk.

The Hotel Palomar San Diego has a “Walk this Way” package. In addition to a deluxe room, guests get a pedometer, bottled water, power bar and foot lotion. Those who walk more than 10,000 steps the day they check in get 50 percent off a room if they return to the Palomar San Diego or Palomar Los Angeles by the end of this year.

Bikes have also become more popular amenities at hotels.

At the Affinia Dumont and Affinia Shelburne in New York,

guests have free use of a Republic Bike that comes with a map of popular routes and landmarks.

Kimpton's four Chicago hotels have "Bike This Town Packages" that include, with a one-night stay in a deluxe room, two complimentary bike rentals, maps, energy bars, sun block and cyclometers to track distance. Kimpton's Argonaut Hotel in San Francisco has a "Bike the Golden Gate Bridge Package" that includes a bike rental for two.

But travelers don't have to rely on their hotels to find ways to exercise outside. All they have to do is get online and find out where the nearest park, hiking trail, beach, tennis court or golf course is. Or, they can search the Internet or community boards at coffeehouses for pickup basketball or volleyball games that may be happening while they're in town.

Or, they can simply use their local park as an obstacle course, says Stacy Berman, owner and head trainer at Stacy's Bootcamp in New York. "Use a bench for dips and box jumps, sprint up a hill and use swings to do modified pull-ups," she says. "Be creative: Exercising outside is not just about running."