

THE “FUTURE” OF HOSPITALITY IS HERE

By NAJOOK PANDYA

Robots roving through hotel lobbies sounds like something straight outta Japan—à la the Henn-na hotel in Nagasaki, a nearly unmanned, robot operated hotel. But robotization is no longer exclusive to Japan, thanks to home grown Silicon Valley firm Savioke, which is taking the hospitality industry by storm with its scion, Relay.

Savioke Relay—also known as a Botlr—is an autonomous delivery robot designed for service and hospitality sectors by the founders, Steve Cousins, Tessa Lau, Adrian Canoso, and Izumi Yaskawa. The robot in question is not as human-like as one would imagine. In fact, a pair of dotted eyes on its display is the only life-resembling feature on its almost three-foot tall body. It might not be quite as expressive as Pixar’s Wall-E, but it is scoring points for being “cute.”

On Instagram, a fleet of selfies with Relay prove how guests are getting along with machines instead of being intimidated. In fact, folks seem to track down these hotels out of curiosity and with an urge to take a selfie. A social magnet like Relay can amp up a hotel’s online footprint, as more than 50 hotels worldwide have proven. The

mere charm of robots is increasing the rate of in-room orders. Robert Rauch of RAR Hospitality notes that his sundry sales tripled thanks to Relay’s presence.

“The bright side is, Relay is not made to steal jobs; it is meant to be an aide to the hotel staff to make their lives easier at work.”

If a hotel chooses to “adopt” Relay, a company employee visits the site to feed the robot the hotel’s layout. And a property with an unconventional layout or numerous staircases might not be compatible with the technology. According to Business Insider, “The employee drives Botlr down the halls using a PlayStation 3 joystick and creates a map in software so the robot knows where each room and elevator is located.” Once mapped, Relay is ready to deliver.



A.L.O., the Relay at Aloft Cupertino
Images courtesy of Savioke.

It docks patiently on its charging station until a guest wants something delivered to their room, say towels or coffee or a toothbrush. A staff member will simply punch in the passcode through its touchscreen interface. Relay then asks for the room number, and once the items are placed in the holder and lid closed, it heads off to do its job. Relay uses Wi-Fi to communicate with an elevator, and it can navigate through obstacles using 3D cameras and sensors. The lid remains locked until the door of the specified room is opened. Relay is connected with the on-site phone network, through which it makes a call informing the guest of its arrival.

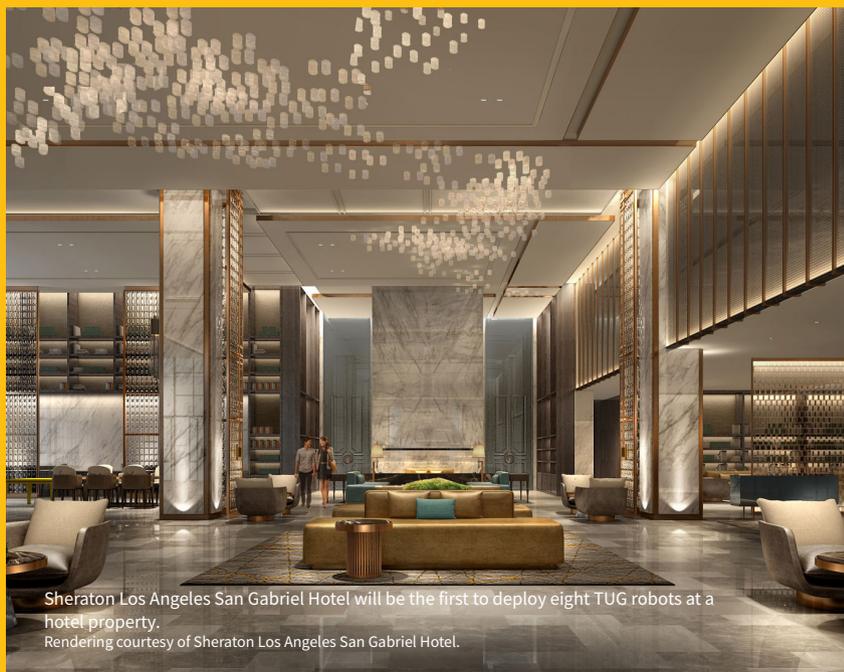
As the guest answers the door, Relay unlocks its lid to allow for receipt of the



Founder & CEO Steve Cousins with Relay

THE FLEET OF ROBOTS IS EMERGING

Botlr now has a friend: Aethon, a supplier of autonomous mobile robots, has come up with TUG robots. Eight of such service robots will soon be deployed for the first time at Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel Hotel at the January, 2018, opening. TUG—just like Relay—can navigate through sensors and communicate with elevators using Wi-Fi. This new kid on the hospitality block can not only deliver linen and toiletries, but it can also take out trash, act as a bellhop carrying luggage, bring food trays, and fetch banquet supplies. Sheraton will employ one TUG to show the guests around, and the remaining seven will keep on their toes, carrying and delivering goods across the hotel.



Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel Hotel will be the first to deploy eight TUG robots at a hotel property. Rendering courtesy of Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel Hotel.



delivery. In cases where the door goes unanswered, Relay is programmed to whiz back to the front desk.

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A recent update allows “API [application programming interface for establishing communication between software applications] integration with third-party technology applications, as well as a mobile app that allows large properties to manage many simultaneous deliveries from a fleet of Relay robots,” a Savioke representative told **hT**. To date, Relay has reached a milestone of nearly 175,000



An employee loading the tray of Botlr named Champ at the Rising Star Sports Ranch Resort. Image courtesy of Savioke.

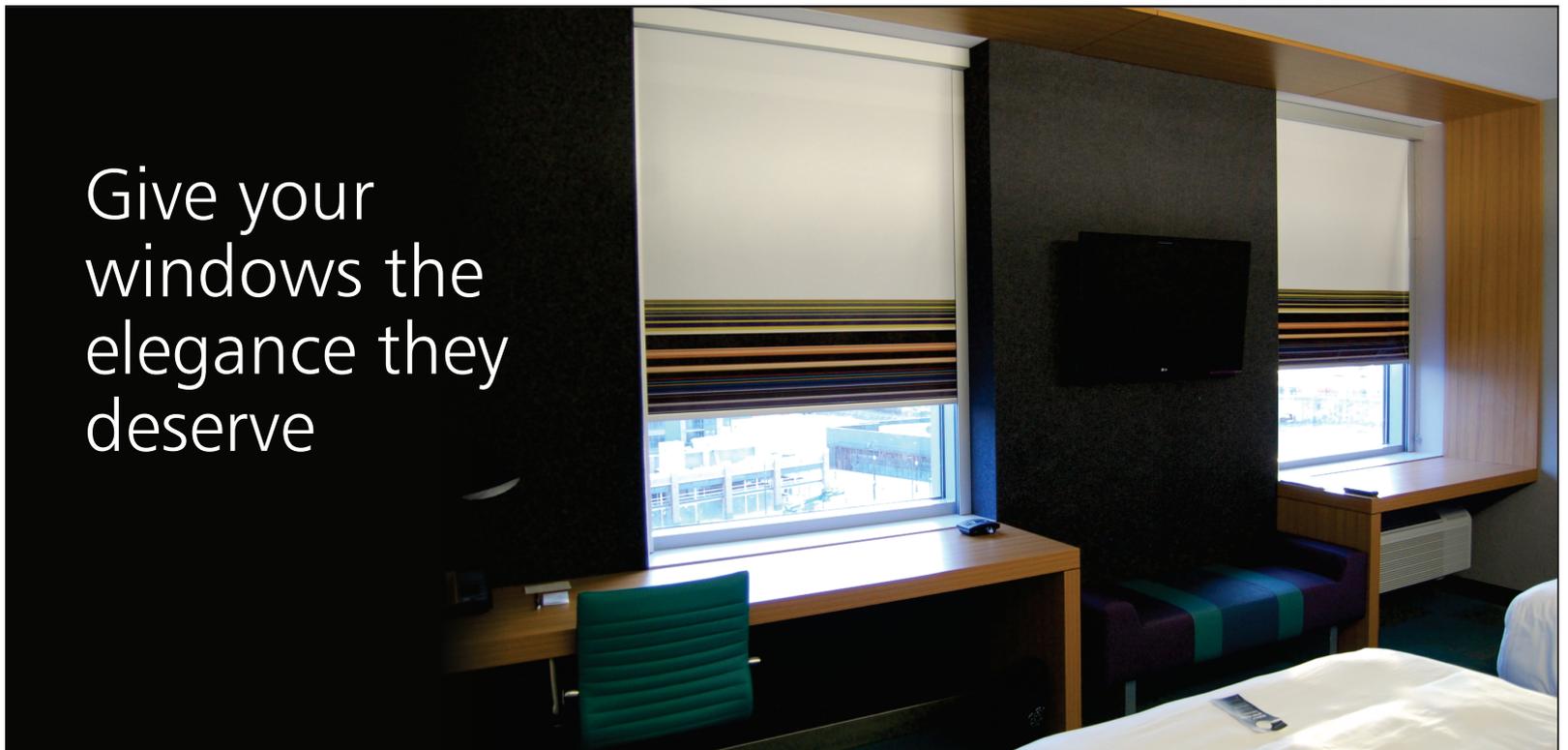
deliveries, and more than 70 hotels around the world have either installed it or are in the process of installation.

Aloft Cupertino was the first major hotel brand to adopt a Botlr named A.L.O. back in 2014. EMC2 hotel in Chicago, which debuted earlier this year, has employed two Relay robots, dubbed Leo and Cleo. Each hotel customizes the “uniform” of this bellhop according to its own taste and style.

Delivery robots are still in nascency and have a long, exciting way to forge.

Recognition of staff and guests tops the list of desirable improvements, with an ability to deliver hot food and beverage a close second. The fact that Botlr does not replace the room service has its pros and cons. The downside obviously is an additional cost per month apart from the paid room service personnel. However, some guests might appreciate transactions without human intervention, both for the privacy it affords as well as not having to tip. The bright side is, Relay is not made to steal jobs; it is meant to be an aide to the hotel staff to make their lives easier at work. **hT**

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