



A premium cabin (above left); the Studiyo (above) and the bag-distributing Yobot (bottom), which never asks for a tip.



# Space odyssey

Barry Divola stays at an innovative New York hotel that should appear in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*.



www.yotel.com

It's called the Yobot, and it lives inside a glass enclosure in the lobby of a New York hotel that feels like the inside of Stanley Kubrick's head. Standing six metres high, the Yobot is a mechanical beast that resembles a cross between a Transformer and a dentist's drill on steroids. It waits for a guest to punch in their details on a screen and deposit their bag into a chute, then swoops to pick it up with its metal pincers and deposit it in one of the white bins that line its habitat. It's all so *2001: A Space Odyssey* that you almost expect it to introduce itself as HAL.

Welcome, earthlings, to Yotel, which opened in June 2011 at Tenth Avenue and 42nd Street, three blocks from Times Square.

The first thing you need to know is the terminology. When you walk in, you will not be greeted at a place most hotels refer to as "reception". Instead – cue David Bowie's "Space

**YOTEL** 570 Tenth Avenue (at W 42nd Street), New York 646 449 7700



Oddity" – you will have entered Ground Control. To your left is a bank of airport-style check-in terminals. You enter your details and out spits a keycard for your cabin – no, they're not called rooms. If there are any problems, there are plenty of staff on hand, dressed in purple and grey uniforms that have the definite whiff of Star Trek convention.

Take the lift – disappointingly, they don't call it a Tardis – to the

fourth floor, and you're at Mission Control. There's a front desk here if you have questions, requests, or you want to buy Yotel merchandise, such as a flatpack build-it-yourself miniature model of your cabin. This level is the nerve centre of Yotel. There's a 650sq m outdoor terrace and bar with views of Manhattan. There's Dohyo, an Asian-fusion restaurant named after the sumo wrestling ring. There's Studiyo, a space for business meetings, film screenings and yoga. And there's Club Lounge, which hosted Jay Z and Alicia Keys on opening night.

So, what about those cabins? Well, this is where the place goes boldly where few New York hotels have gone before. The brains behind Yotel is Simon Woodroffe, best known for his YO! Sushi chain. In 2007, he was taking a flight and was upgraded to the pointy end of

the plane. As he was enjoying the experience, a lightbulb went off over his head. What if he opened a hotel that combined the little luxuries of first-class air travel with the clever use of limited space seen in Japanese pod hotels? The result was Yotel. He started with two in the UK, at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in 2007, and the following year opened another at Amsterdam airport.

The New York Yotel is not only the first one outside of Europe, but the first that's not near a runway. At 27 floors and 669 rooms – sorry, cabins – it's also the largest hotel to open in Manhattan in almost a decade. The premium cabin I've booked is 15sq m, which although on the small side, isn't too cramped by New York standards. Also, as you may have heard, it's not size, it's what you do with it that matters. And I soon realise they've utilised every square centimetre of space. The bed is motorised, so it can be converted into a couch. There's a big flatscreen TV on one wall, a compact work desk, and a small hanging space with a few drawers for limited storage. The bathroom is separated by a moveable curtain. The shower has a large monsoon-style head and two body wash/shampoo pump-packs, one called GET UP and one called GET DOWN. I tried both of these and can't vouch for their different properties, but they both made me smell pretty good.

With prices as low as \$149 (plus tax, in low season), it's definitely cheaper than the standard Manhattan boutique hotel, which is usually north of \$300. And come on, it's got a Yobot.

If you're a little more flush with funds, you may prefer a night in a first cabin king, and enjoy the hot tub on your private terrace and a revolving, round bed I would describe as "shagadelic" if it was 1997 and Mike Myers still had a career. ❖