

George Jetson, Your Room Is Ready

**CITY
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GENZLINGER**

We've all had this dream for so long that some of us have probably forgotten about it. It's the dream that someday we'll be able to navigate New York without ever being at the mercy of a rude cabdriver, an indifferent waiter or a butterfingerted bellhop.

It is, in short, the dream of a robotic New York. A hotel opening soon in Midtown has an amusing lobby gimmick called Yobot that suggests we may yet find our way to that "Jetsons" future.

You remember "The Jetsons," the cartoon from the early 1960s about a space family surrounded by not-yet-invented gear that included Rosey the Robot. Any kid who ever saw the show assumed that everything in it would soon come to pass: the video phones, the push-button food and, of course, the labor-saving robots. The first two we have, more or less, but humans are still tasked with much of our daily drudgery.

In the glass-front lobby of Simon Woodroffe's Yotel, at 10th Avenue and 41st Street, a self-service robot named Yobot stands ready to rack guests' luggage into storage bins so they don't have to haul it around town if they've arrived before check-in or want to catch a matinee after checkout.

It's just a robotic arm, not humanoid like Rosey, and it's as much entertainment for passers-by as it is utilitarian. Your bag goes on a slab that Yobot then picks up and slides into one of 133 lockers, usually with a flourish of dipping, twisting and other acrobatics. You get back a bar-coded ticket, which you insert into

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the system when you want Yobot to return your bags.

But it's a significant step toward that blissful day when robots might routinely drive our cabs, bring our coffee, carry our bags and so on — no tipping, no mistakes and, best of all, no attitude. Robots of various sorts have been in use in fields like manufacturing and medicine for years, but the breakthrough here is that Yobot is made so that anyone can master it.

"It's not what the robot is doing," John Phelps, who designed the thing,

said during a demonstration for City Critic on Tuesday. "It's having a new operator come in without any pretraining and be able to make it do what it does. We have a new operator coming in every minute."

Mr. Woodroffe, a British entrepreneur whose YO! Sushi restaurants were using robotics as early as 1997, saw Yobot in action for the first time that day and seemed to enjoy the show. His first question to Mr. Phelps wasn't about technical matters or cost; it was, "Did you have fun doing it?"

That spirit, Mr. Woodroffe hopes, will permeate the hotel, which opens June 1 and will have 669 rooms. It's the fourth hotel in the chain, the first in the United States, and the pitch is high-tech stylishness on a budget. The standard rooms show Yotel's signature maximum use of minimal space; the introductory rate is \$149 a night (less than a third of a recent Web quote from the Marriott Marquis a few blocks away). A couple of tables in the sleek dining room sink into the floor so the space can become a dance floor late at night. Flip a conference room tabletop and it turns into a billiard table.

As for Yobot and the other gizmos, like touch-screen check-in rather than the traditional front desk, Mr. Woodroffe said, "I think the robotics you see there are absolutely the tip of the iceberg." And, based on the reaction to his sushi robots, he thinks they'll be embraced. "People actually loved them," he said, "and interestingly, the most commonly said thing was 'Can we buy one?'"

David Greenbaum didn't have quite enough luck getting people to buy robots at Robot Village, a store he opened in 2004 on West 81st Street; it didn't survive the recession, and the space is now occupied by a foot massage place. But the interest was there, especially among children ("I didn't realize the average height of a client was going to be three to four feet," he said), and now his business has evolved into giving robot presentations, classes, even birthday parties. He, too, still sees robots ahead.

"Robots are still in their infancy," Mr. Greenbaum said, adding, "I think we'll

be wowed in our lifetime."

Now let's swat away a few objections to the robot-assisted future. First, there's the complaint that people want human contact. Nonsense. All we do these days, in a crowd, at a party, even during a face-to-face conversation, is poke at our electronic devices. Human interaction is so last century.

Second, there are probably some folks who enjoy being verbally abused by service-industry workers. No problem. Rosey actually had quite a mouth on her, and some of Mr. Woodroffe's sushi robots greeted customers unprintably. If you want insufferable robotic service, some niche robot-makers will surely pop up to provide it.

Finally, jobs. It's not as if Yotel will have no human employees. Nigel Buchanan, the hotel's operations director, said the hope was that automating some grunt work would enable those humans to focus on hospitality.

But, yeah, some would-be actors might have to find something else to do when all our waiters and doormen are robots. Frankly, though, we have rather a surplus of would-be actors in this town anyway. And, hey, they could always become foot masseurs. Some jobs will always need a human touch.

**Dreaming of a robotic
New York. An idyllic
future, or perhaps just
a more metallic one, is
drawing near.**







PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC MICHAEL JOHNSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MIGHTY BELLHOP Rosey the Robot he isn't, but the Yobot luggage handler, above and left, gives the Yotel in Manhattan a futuristic feel. Nigel Buchanan, the hotel's operations director, demonstrated Yobot, who hoists bags into storage bins.