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Are Disposable Hotel Slippers the Next Plastic Straws?

Slippers supplied by hotels — flimsy models usually made of plastic and fabric — are the next single-use item in the cross hairs of sustainability activists.



The Slipper Factory in India manufactures disposable slippers for the hotel industry. Credit: Sam Panthaky/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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In November, managers at the [Arenas del Mar](#) resort near Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica, challenged employees to come up with ways to operate more sustainably. The maintenance crew suggested electric locks on guest room doors. The

food and beverage department proposed making jams from fruit peels. And the housekeepers advised: Ditch the slippers.

“It didn’t make sense because you use them once and throw them out,” said Hans Pfister, the president and co-founder of [Cayuga Collection](#), the hotel group that manages the resort, which took housekeeping’s advice. “It’s very wasteful.”

Like plastic straws and mini bottles of shampoo, disposable slippers — flimsy models usually made of plastic and fabric, and often found bedside at turndown or bagged in hotel closets — are the next single-use item in the cross hairs of sustainability activists.

“Anything single-use is problematic,” wrote Willy Legrand, a sustainable hospitality expert and a professor at the IU International University of Applied Sciences in Bad Honnef, Germany, in an email. He cited the large footprint of a small slipper once you factor in production, shipping and waste. Single-use slippers, he said, “feel out of place and out of touch.”

Nina Boys, the vice president of sustainability for [Beyond Green](#), a group of hotels vetted for their sustainability practices, called slippers “low-hanging fruit” in the fight against plastic.

Slippers as status symbols

While plastic straws can be easily replaced with paper versions and small shampoo bottles by larger dispensers, subbing for slippers is more complicated based not just on materials but cultural expectations and perceptions of luxury.

Providing slippers in hotels is rooted in the Asian tradition of removing your shoes indoors, said Diana Verde Nieto, a sustainability expert and the author of “[Reimagining Luxury](#).”

“As hotels started to cater to international guests, particularly those from Asia, the provision of slippers became a way to accommodate and respect these cultural norms,” Ms. Verde Nieto wrote in an email. She added that the comfort and hygiene associated with slippers has become a universal luxury standard today.

Offering slippers also helps hotels earn status ratings from travel organizations like [AAA](#) or the European Union’s [Hotelstars](#).

Some resorts have found it easier to address sustainability through food waste and community engagement than footwear. [Winvian](#), the boutique resort with 18 cottages and one suite on 113 acres in Connecticut’s Litchfield Hills, grows about 70 percent of its produce on the property and built a cottage from the wood cleared at the site. Guests receive reusable sandals in the spa, but in the rooms, visitors will find plusher designs that they are encouraged to take home and reuse; about half do and the rest are discarded.

“The problem is, it’s one of those things that people have come to expect,” said Heather Smith Winkelmann, the managing director of the resort.

Ivan Bauza is the director of sales and marketing at [the Setai](#), a luxury hotel in Miami Beach. “Our guests are very demanding and expect everything brand-new,” he said, adding that amenities like full-size bottles of shampoo and slippers that are intended for guests to take home — occasionally including trendy models from the boutique brand [Brunch](#) — “shows the luxury aspect” of hospitality.

‘Rethinking’ slippers

The waste associated with disposable slippers is sizable, according to Mr. Legrand of IU, who calculated that high-end hotels in the United States with an average occupancy of 63 percent might discard more than 10 million pairs of slippers a month.

In a 2018 study, Chekitan S. Dev, a professor in the hospitality school at Cornell University, tracked 50 hotel amenities to determine how much they were used. Only 27 percent of guests used bathrobes supplied in the rooms. “We didn’t study slippers, but can safely assume that as many, or a few more, use slippers, especially as they are often unpacked and placed at bedside during turndown service, encouraging their use,” Mr. Dev said.

Hotel cleaning standards often dictate discarding slippers that have been removed from their packaging, according to members of Unite Here, the union that represents hotel housekeepers.

“Waste from hotel slippers may seem minor when compared to larger issues like energy consumption, food waste or water usage,” Mr. Legrand wrote. “However, at the end of the day, every bit of waste adds up and increasing attention is being paid to these aspects as part of a broader sustainable industry approach.”

Sourcing greener footwear

Hotel companies that have made commitments to banning single-use plastics have blazed a trail to more eco-friendly slippers.

[Six Senses](#), a collection of 23 high-end resorts, offers slippers made from natural materials like jute or bamboo, or from recycled plastic. [Six Senses Crans-Montana](#) in Switzerland stocks [Kaaia](#) felt slippers made from recycled plastic bottles that can be washed and reused or recycled at the end of their life span. [Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group](#) phased out single-use slippers in 2022 and replaced them with models made of cardboard, cork and cotton that are cleaned and restocked in the rooms.

[The Dorian, Autograph Collection](#) hotel in Calgary, Canada, stopped supplying disposable slippers in the hotel’s suites in favor of upgraded ones that are thicker and more durable; they are available on demand to guests in other rooms. Patrons are

encouraged to take them home for “multiple uses rather than single use,” wrote Ian Jones, the general manager, in an email.

[Green Key](#), which vets hotels for sustainability practices, suggests hotels make slippers and other single-use amenities available on request, rather than mandating elimination. In keeping with its commitment to eliminate single-use plastics, the [Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina](#) only supplies slippers to guests who ask for them.

Few slipper-supplying resorts go as far to reduce footwear waste as [Alila Villas Uluwatu](#) in Bali. At its on-site Sustainability Lab, which turns glass bottles into drinking glasses and old umbrellas into tote bags, shredded slipper parts become stuffing for bean bag chairs.

“By closing the loop on waste, we are creating a circular economy,” said Morgan Martinello, the resort’s general manager.

Refuse or reuse

Will travelers start bringing their own slippers the way they carry their own water bottles and shopping bags? They might have to.

“We are having many a debate about slippers, pens, cotton balls, toiletries,” said Oliver Milne-Watson, the general manager of [the Newman](#), a luxury hotel set to open later this year in London. The rooms will not contain single-use plastics though the management has found it difficult to find a satisfying reusable slipper.

“We’re asking, ‘Can we make this with something with a longer life cycle and if not do we really need it?’” Mr. Milne-Watson said.

Experts doubt the needle on slippers will fully swing until travelers speak up.

“We are at the stage now with this as it was with food waste a few years ago,” Mr. LaGrand, the IU professor, said. “It is when we start monitoring, measuring and quantifying both the cost of sourcing and wasting that the realization kicks in: We must do something about it!”

They are already on the minds of some travelers. “I’ve contemplated how short of a life span these tend to have in the past, and now I’ve gotten into the habit of taking my used pair with me when I leave the hotel,” said Karla Cobreiro, 33, a publicist based in Miami. She puts them in a carry-on alongside a sleep mask and other essentials. “Now I slip into them on long flights.”

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