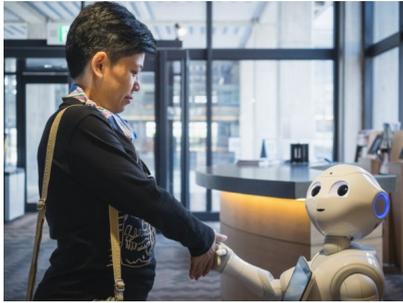


# THE SILENT REVOLUTION OF ROBOTS IN TOURISM



Don't be surprised if you cross paths with a robot running up and down the aisles and entering the elevators, the next time you stay in a hotel. They take extra towels for guests, give information to passengers lost at airports and even get some drinks ready on cruise ships. What could have been descriptions in books by Isaac Asimov or Aldous Huxley are now the brave real world. Robots in tourism are reality.

Robots, whimsical or just functional, stand out in the futuristic lines of technological breakthroughs in tourism, but the fronts are many. From virtual assistants who use the Internet of Things to turn off the bedroom lights or turn the TV on, to systems that ensure the automation of checked baggage and the face recognition when boarding at airports in Brazil and abroad, the news keep on coming.

From the scholar's standpoint, the space that has been automated by robots in tourism is related to operational activities. This opinion believes that **human and trained professionals will remain crucial in fields such as planning, administration and, above all, to address unexpected events that will naturally occur in the activity of transporting and hosting people made of flesh and blood.**

## **Hotels: Robot Receptionists?**

Is the idea of having dinosaurs talking to guests at the front desk a bit odd at first? Not at Henn na Hotel, a Japanese company whose name, in the local language, means something like "strange hotel". Nothing more appropriate for the first hosting experience mostly based on machines.

There are five units operating in Tokyo and other locations in Japan. The process is identical in all of them. The guest, who made the reservation online, is welcomed by receptionists-robots, which can have a human or dinosaur appearance, both fluent in English. The identification is conducted by the guest, using a touch screen panel and a document reader. After that, a luggage cart-shaped robot appears to take the baggage to the room.

Already lodged, the guest finds beside the bed a personal assistance device. Using voice commands, the device turns off the lights, turns the TV on and even orders food - delivered by another machine, of course.

Throughout the whole process, the client never interacts with humans (unless he stays for many days and calls someone to clean the bedding). A radical proposal, but perhaps the path soon to be followed by many hotels throughout the world.

## **From Room Service to Concierge**

Particularly in the United States, there is an increase in the number of establishments that have adopted the so-called Automated Guided Vehicles to carry out delivery services, from drinks to towels, in hotel rooms. Usually, the guest completes the request (a toothbrush or a sandwich, for example) using the phone or mobile app. Relying on a GPS, the tiny robot slowly and safely travels through the aisles, enters an elevator and tells the guest it has arrived (via phone call).

The one-meter tall Relay is the most common model, manufactured by Savioke, from Silicon Valley. In this Californian technological hub, we can see it working in hotels like the Crowne Plaza San José and the Aloft Cupertino. In many places, the machine even has its own specific name. At the EMC2 in Chicago, the units are called Cleo and Leo. At Jen hotels in Singapore, we have Jena and Jenó.

There are also other models and manufacturers, like Tug from Aethon, which carries luggage at the Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel, and Pepper from SoftBank Robotics, with a humanoid shape ready to give information to guests at the Mandarin Oriental in Las Vegas.

In some hotels of the Marriott group, such as Westin, St. Regis and Aloft in the US, Alexa will get the spotlight, Amazon's virtual assistant. It's the "soul" of gadgets that will obey the guests' voice commands, whenever they decide to ask for information about the hotel, turn the alarm clock on, play music, adjust brightness and temperature and make a room request. It should be implemented later this year.

### **Cruises: Technology On-board**

Technology is a recurring presence in the most modern fleets of the major cruise lines. However, like everything else, these breakthroughs seem more visible to passengers when they are robot-shaped. And, in the sea, two companies stand out.

When the Quantum of the Seas was launched in 2014, Royal Caribbean, amid plenty of innovations, became the center of attention thanks to its Bionic Bar, where a pair of robotic arms accurately prepares a wide range of drinks. **Today, futuristic bartenders are on other high-tech company ships like the Anthem, Ovation, Harmony and Symphony of the Seas.** The passenger orders the drink on a touch screen and follows the whole process live.

Robot Pepper is the star on Costa Cruises, since this is one of the models with more human-like features, precisely developed to interact with people. He is part of the crew of Costa Diadema, where it gives information about the ship itself and activity ideas.

### **Airports - Robots as Assistants and Guides**

Robots are increasingly frequent in airports around the world. They are used to guide passengers through the aisles to their boarding gates or even to assist in security tasks.

Care-E is one of the latest breakthroughs, developed by KLM for a two-function role: to tell passengers the fastest way to their boarding gate and to carry their luggage. The little robot can carry volumes of up to 35 kilos at a speed of 4.8km/h, the average speed of a human when walking. Equipped with elaborate sensors, it will interact with humans, even with a bored expression in case it encounters a user walking slowly, or whistling to draw the attention of those inattentive.

The Dutch airline will test the breakthrough in short periods of time at the JFK airport in New York and in San Francisco, both in the U.S. Far from its main hub, the Schiphol Airport, which serves Amsterdam, Netherlands, where they began testing their first robot, Spencer - to guide passengers to their boarding gates, calculating the best routes to do it.

With a cartoon-like appeal, Spencer is a primary example of how charisma plays a fundamental role when it comes to serving the public. The robot Josie Pepper has lots of it, even displaying a Lufthansa badge at Terminal 2 of Munich Airport, where it is being tested since February. Unlike its Dutch colleague, this humanoid has more advanced artificial intelligence tools and is able to

formulate original (or at least not pre-formatted) answers for each different question about the airport and destinations.

The trio of robots from Mineta San Jose International Airport has also plenty of charisma, while serving the region of Silicon Valley, California. The droids, with female faces, dance and sing to draw passengers' attention, who find in their touchscreens information ranging from flight schedules to the list of restaurants in the terminal.

Shier but equally friendly, the Troika robots, which are already in their second generation, guide passengers through the Incheon International Airport in the South Korean capital Seoul. **They also do the check-in procedure, speak Korean, Japanese, Chinese and English and harmoniously coexist with another electronic "species" that roam through the terminal, whose task is cleaning the floor.**

Without interacting with the public, but with eyes attentive to everything, blue and rocket-shaped robots catch the attention of anyone walking through Terminal 2 at LaGuardia Airport in New York. The machine, called Knightscope K5, is being tested since February and is used for safety and other operations, like internal traffic.

The Geneva airport in Switzerland is testing the services of LEO, which carries suitcases from the terminal's entrance to the check-in counter without blabbing too much. It was developed by Sita, an airport technology company that has developed other models, including Kate a check-in totem, which has even been featured in tests. But, so far, its use has not been confirmed yet. Who knows, perhaps you will see it in your next travel.

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