

## Healthy, natural snacks invade hotel minibars

By Anya Martin, MarketWatch

**DECATUR, Ga. — Hotels and resorts are increasingly stocking minibars with healthier alternatives to traditional high-fat, high-sugar snacks — a boon to business and leisure travelers as well as the hospitality industry.**

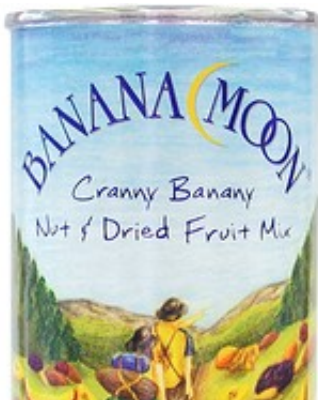
At the Hyatt Hotels Corp.-owned [H -0.83%](#) Andaz Wall Street in New York, minibars are stocked with organic Clif Bars and Terra plain and vegetable natural chips. This summer, the Four Seasons Hotel Austin in Texas will test the sales of six organic, healthy and/or locally-produced products, including peeled mango, ginger tea and nut-and-fruit gluten-free energy bars.

Three out of four in-room snack-box choices in [Loews Hotels L -1.76%](#) include low-fat items such as trail mix, cashews and honey-wheat pretzels. The trail mix and cashews outsell the chocolate cookies, and Fiji Water is the minibar's most popular item at the Loews Coronado Bay Resort in San Diego, said Adam Martindale, the resort's director of food and beverage.

Minibars were once mostly a collection of high-fat, sugary impulse treats like chips, cookies, sodas, plus alcoholic beverages. While those items won't be disappearing, travelers — particularly business travelers with a hectic schedule — will notice changes for the better when it comes to in-room convenience options.

Frequent business travelers may be at risk from unhealthy habits on the road. Those who take more than 20 trips per month were more likely to suffer from obesity and other health-related issues, according to results of a study of 13,000 workers by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health released in May.

While companies cut back on business travel during the economic downturn, they also are starting to loosen their purse strings and send workers back on the road. U.S. hotels raised rates by 3% to meet the increased demand in the first quarter of 2011, according to American Express Global Business Travel.



In-Room Plus Inc.  
Banana Moon Cranny Banany nut and dried fruit snack mix.

Hotels with minibars increasingly offer at least one or two healthier choices, and nuts are the most popular, said Matthew Jones, director of West Coast operations for In-Room West, a subsidiary of In-Room Plus which stocks minibars in hundreds of hotels nationwide and globally.

The trend goes hand-in-hand with the economic recovery. Some hotels that previously removed minibars altogether are now putting them back and seeing in-room snacks as a value-added amenity, he added.

Diversifying minibar options may mean organic, gluten-free,

preservative-free and low-calorie, but also more local offerings or sustainable personal-care items, such as toothbrushes recycled out of yogurt containers paired with items like Tom's of Maine natural toothpaste, Jones said.

"Healthy items can help to enhance revenue for a specific property and be something to set a property apart," he said. "You want items that a guest can't get from a corner store." Many hotels are reordering organic and low-calorie offerings, indicating that they are selling, Jones said.

### **Hotel guests ask for healthier food**

Supporting the amenity approach, minibars themselves have not been big moneymakers for hotels, accounting for less than 1% of total hotel revenues in 2010, said Robert Mandelbaum, director of research information services for PKF Hospitality Research, which tracks hotel trends. Many guests are reluctant to pay typically steep mark-ups for snack items, but customizing in-room offerings can create an additional incentive to buy, he said.

"In general, the whole key to a hotel is to make you feel at home," Mandelbaum said. "If you eat healthy at home, if you open a minibar and see something healthy, the chance you will make a purchase goes up."

The Four Seasons Hotel in Austin decided to add organic, sustainable and local products in response to an increased guest demand, said Olya Johnston, head of the hotel's room-service department. Mothers, in particular, have complained about not having alternatives to sugary snacks in private bars, the company term for minibars, she added.

"People are much more aware of food than they were five years ago," Johnston said. "They ask questions like, 'What's in it?' 'What kind of oil?' 'Is it organic?'"

The healthier products will be available initially in rooms on just one hotel floor, but if they sell well, the hotel plans to offer them in all its rooms, she added.

While healthier minibar offerings may be on the rise, don't expect to open your minibar and not see the traditional candy bars, Jones said. For example, Snickers remain a top seller for In-Room West.

The demand for healthier minibar snacks has been growing slower than the consumer market might predict, said Alvaro Garza, founder and president of the Dallas, Texas-based Healthy Minibar, which specializes in all-natural snack products. Healthy Minibar has attracted 42 hotel clients including the Four Seasons Hotel Austin during the past few years, but the biggest challenge has been educating hotels about the demand for and health benefits of natural snack food products, he said.

"Even though success may not be immediate, hotels are going to need that support to make the transition towards 'better for you' [food]," Garza said.

Hyatt Regency and Grand Hyatt hotels have mostly removed in-room minibars but some of the properties in more health-conscious markets are selling trail mixes and similar snacks in lobby grab-and-go

markets, said Katie Rackoff, a Hyatt Hotels spokeswoman.

Even if minibars do include healthier choices, travelers need to keep in mind that organic is not always equal to low calorie and that convenience itself can be unhealthy because it limits movement, said Terry Riley, a cognitive psychologist who advises companies on how to educate employees on ways to stay healthy on the road.

“If you only have to walk from the bed or the chair to the minibar,” he said, “it’s not the same as having to walk out to a restaurant.”

*Anya Martin, based in Decatur, Ga., writes for MarketWatch.*