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Your Hotel Room: The Light Switches

Chinese hotel rooms you'll be staying in – while looking similar to what you're used to – have notable differences. One of those distinctions is in how the lights work.

Unlike your house, or a Western hotel room, where you use the switch on the lamp or flip a switch on the wall, Chinese rooms use a master control panel, mounted just inside the entrance, which controls almost all the lights.

This panel does not work the way you think it would, especially if you are just getting into your room at 11:30 pm after an all-day flight across the Pacific, beyond tired, hungry, anxious about your child, and a little freaked out about being dropped into an alien city. We spent several minutes flipping switches futilely before discovering the secrets:

First, the instructions written in English on the master control panel are of no help.

More importantly, the master control panel is activated by your room key card. There is a slot on top of the panel you slip the card into, and only then do the switches work. Your key card must remain in the slot to keep the lights on – when you leave your room for the day, taking your key with you, all the lights turn off. This is a clever way to conserve energy; however, this likely means your mini-refrigerator is turned off as well.

If you want lights on in the bathroom, you'll need to flip the switch in the hall, which takes some practice, especially if you don't want to wake up your spouse or new child in the middle of the night with a blast of light.

The lights by the beds, the floor lamp, and sometimes the desk lamp are also controlled by this panel.

Some rooms will also have a secondary control panel mounted in your

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bedside table, which for a Westerner, resembles one of those James Bond-villain-style consoles. (The card key still needs to be in the panel back in the hallway for your bedside controls to work.) Some of these consoles even control the TV and piped-in music. For you, pressing those buttons and laughing like Dr. Evil is pretty funny, but remember, if you're adopting a toddler, those buttons will be irresistible.

