

# How to Survive a Hotel Fire<sup>†</sup>

Have you ever been in a hotel during a fire? It is a frightening experience, but one that you should start preparing for. The majority of people who die in hotel fires need not have done so. It is quite common to be unprepared to deal with such an emergency. Hotels, of course, have no excuse for being ill-prepared, but you cannot depend on their staffs in case of a fire. History has shown that some hotels won't even call the Fire Department.

Contrary to what you have seen on television or in the movies, fire is unlikely to chase you down and burn you to death. It's the byproducts of fire that can kill you. Superheated fire gases (smoke) and panic are almost always the causes of death, long before the fire arrives, if it ever does. This is very important to understand.

To survive a hotel fire, you must know how to avoid **smoke** and **panic**. With this in mind, here are a few tips:

## Smoke

Where there is smoke, there is not necessarily fire. A smoldering mattress, for instance, will produce great amounts of smoke. Air conditioning and air exchange systems will sometimes pick up smoke from one room and carry it to other rooms or floors. In any case, your prime objective should still be to leave at the first sign of smoke. Smoke, being warmer, will start accumulating at the ceiling and work its way down. The first thing you will notice is that you will not be able to see Exit signs. Another thing about smoke you should be aware of is how irritating it is to the eyes. The problem is that your eyes will only take so much irritation, and then they close. Try all you want, you won't be able to open them if there is still smoke in the area. It is one of your body's compensatory mechanisms. Lastly, the fresh air you want to breathe is at or near the floor. Get on your hands and knees (or stomach) and stay there as you make your way out. Those who don't probably won't get far.

Think about this poor man's predicament for a moment:

*He wakes up at 2:30 A.M. to a smell of smoke. He puts on his trousers and runs into the hallway, only to be greeted by heavy smoke. He has no idea where the exit is. He runs to the right. He's coughing and gagging, his eyes hurt. Where is it? Where is it!? Panic begins to set in. At about the same time that he thinks he may be going the wrong way, his eyes close. He can't find his way back to his room (it wasn't so bad in there). His chest hurts, he desperately needs oxygen. Total panic sets in as he runs in the other direction. He is completely disorientated. He cannot hold his breath any longer. We find him at 2:50. Dead.*

What caused all the smoke? A small fire in a room where they store the roll-away beds. Remember, the presence of smoke does not necessarily mean that the hotel is burning down.

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<sup>†</sup> Excerpted/edited from "Warning: hotels could be hazardous to your health ...", by Retired Captain R.H. Kauffman of the *Los Angeles County Fire Department*.

# Panic

Panic is sudden, overpowering terror, often afflicting many people at once. It is the product of your imagination running wild, and will set in as soon as it dawns on you that you are lost, disoriented, or unaware of what to do. Panic is almost irreversible: once it sets in, it seems to grow, and will make you do things that can kill you. People in a state of panic are rarely able to save themselves. If you understand what's going on, what to do, where to go, and how to get there, panic will not set in.

The man in the above example would not have died if he had known what to do. Had he known the Exit was to the left and four doors down on the left, he could have gotten on his hands and knees where there was fresh air and started counting doorways. Even if he couldn't keep his eyes open, he could have felt his way as he crawled, counting the doors. 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... BINGO! He would **not** have panicked. He would be alive today, telling of his great hotel fire experience.

# Exits

The elevator drops you at the 12th floor and you start looking for your room. Let's see ... room 1234 ... here it is. You open the door and drop your luggage. At that very moment, turn around and go back into the hallway to find your Exit. Don't go into the bathroom, open the curtains, turn on the television, or lay on the bed. You are tired and you want to relax, but it is absolutely critical that you develop the habit of checking for your Exit as soon as you drop your luggage. You may never get another chance. If two of you are sharing a room, both of you locate your Exit. Talk it over as you walk towards it. Is it on the left or right? Do you have to turn a corner? Open the Exit door: what do you see, stairs or another door? (Sometimes there are two doors to go through, especially in newer hotels.) It could be fatal to crawl into a broom closet, thinking it was the Exit! Are you passing any rooms where your friends are staying? If there were a fire, you might want to bang on their doors as you go by. Is there anything in the hallway that would be in your way, perhaps an ice machine? As you arrive back at your room, take a look once more. Get a good mental picture of what everything looks like. Do you think you could get to the Exit with a blindfold on? This procedure takes less than one minute, and to be effective, it must become a habit. Do it **consistently!**

# Using Exits

Should you have to leave your room during the night, it is important to close the door behind you. This is very effective in keeping out fire and will minimize smoke damage to your belongings.

*There was a house fire in Los Angeles where an entire family died. It was a three-bedroom house with a den and family room. That night, the occupants had left every door in the house open except one, and it led to the washroom where the family dog slept. The house, except for that washroom, was a total loss. When the fire was knocked down, firemen opened the door to find the family dog wagging his tail. Because the door was left shut, the dog and room were in fine shape.*

Some doors take hours to burn through. They are excellent fire stops, so close every door you go through. If you find smoke in the Exit stairwell, you can bet people are leaving the doors open as they enter. Always take your key with you. Get into the habit of putting the key in the same place every time you stay in a hotel. Someplace close to the bed, so you can grab it when you leave, without wasting time looking for it. It is important to close your door as you leave, but it is equally important

not to lock yourself out. You may find conditions in the hallway untenable, and want to return to your room.

If you are now in the habit of checking your exit and leaving the room key somewhere easily available, you are pretty well prepared to leave the hotel in case of a fire, so let's walk through it once. Something awakens you during the night. It could be the telephone, someone banging on the door, the smell of smoke, or some other disturbance. But, whatever it is, investigate it before you go back to sleep.

Let's suppose you wake up to smoke in your room. Grab your room key, roll off the bed, and head for the door on your hands and knees. Even if you can tolerate the smoke by standing, do not try to do it. You need to save your eyes and lungs for as long as possible. Before you open the door, feel it with the palm of your hand. If the door or knob is quite hot, don't open it. The fire could be just outside. Otherwise, with the palm of your hand still on the door (in case you need to slam it shut), slowly open the door and peek into the hallway to assess conditions. As you make your way to the Exit, stay against the wall on the side where the Exit is. It is very easy to get lost or disoriented in a smoky atmosphere. If you are on the wrong side of the hallway, you might crawl right past the Exit. If you are in the middle of the hall, people who are running will trip over you. Stay on the same side as the Exit, count doors as you go. When you reach the Exit and begin to descend, it is very important that you walk down and hang onto the handrail as you go. Don't take this point lightly! The people who will be running will knock you down and you might not be able to get up. Just hang on and stay out of everyone's way. All you have to do now is leave the building, cross the street, and watch the action. When the fire is out and the smoke clears, you will be allowed to re-enter the building. If you closed your room door when you left, your belongings should be in pretty good shape.

Smoke will sometimes get into the Exit stairwell. If it is a tall building, this smoke may not rise very high before it cools and becomes heavy. This is called "stacking". If your room is on the 20th floor, for instance, you could enter the stairwell and find it clear. As you descend, you could encounter smoke that has "stacked". Do not try to run through it: people die that way. Turn around and walk up. Now you must really hang onto the handrail. The people running down will probably be glassy-eyed and in a panic and will knock you right out of your socks! They will run over anything in their way, including a fireman. You will feel as though you are going upstream, but hang on and keep heading up towards the roof. If for some reason you try one of the doors to an upper floor and find it locked, that is normal, don't worry about it. Exit stairwells are designed so that you cannot enter from the street or roof. Once inside, however, you can exit at the street or roof but often cannot go from floor to floor (this is done for security purposes). When you reach the roof, prop the door open with something. This is the only time you will leave a door open. Any smoke in the stairwell can now vent itself to the atmosphere, and you won't be locked out. Now find the windward side of the building (the wet finger method is quite reliable), have a seat, and wait until they find you. Roofs have proved to be a safe secondary exit and refuge area. Stay put. Firemen will always make a thorough search of the building, looking for bodies. Live ones are nice to find.

## Your Room

After you locate your Exit and prepare your key, there is one more thing for you to do. Become familiar with your room. See if your bathroom has a vent; all do, but some have electric motors. If you decide to remain in your room, turn it on to help remove the smoke. Take a good look at the window in your room. Does it open? Does it have a latch or a lock? Does it slide? Now open the window (if it works) and look outside. What do you see? A sign? Ledges? How high up are you? Get a good mental

picture of what is outside; it may come in handy. It is important to know how to open and close your window. It could be dark and smoky in the room. If you wake up to smoke in your room and the door is too hot to open or the hallway is completely filled with smoke, don't panic. Many people have defended themselves quite nicely in their rooms, and so can you. One of the first things you will want to do is open the window to vent the smoke. Do not break the window: the broken glass from the window can be very dangerous. Besides, if you break out your window, say with a chair, you could hit a fireman on the street below. If there is fresh air outside, leave the window open, but keep an eye on it.

At this point, most people would stay at the window, waving frantically, while their room continues to fill with smoke if the fire burns through, but you must be aggressive and fight back. Here are some things you can do, in any order you choose: if the room phone works, let someone know you are in there. Flip on the bathroom vent. Fill the bath with water (do not get into it - it is for fire fighting; you'd be surprised how many people try to save themselves by getting into a tub of water - which is how you cook lobsters and crabs as well!). Wet some sheets or towels, and stuff the cracks of your door to keep out the smoke. With your ice-bucket, bail the water from the bath onto the door to keep it cool. Feel the walls: if they are hot, bail water onto them too. You can put your mattress up against the door and block it in place with the dresser. Keep it wet; keep everything wet. Who cares about the mess? A wet towel tied around your nose and mouth is an effective filter if you fold it in a triangle and put the corner in your mouth. If you swing a wet towel around the room, it will help clear the smoke. If there is a fire outside the window, pull down the curtains and move everything combustible away from the window. Splash water all around the window. Use your imagination and you may come up with some tricks of your own. The point is, there shouldn't be any reason to panic; keep fighting until reinforcements arrive. It won't be long.

## Elevators

There is not an elevator made that can be used as a "safe" exit. Elevators, by law, cannot be considered an Exit. They are complicated devices with minds of their own. The problem is that most people only know one way out of a building, the way they came in, and if that was the elevator, they are in trouble. Elevator shafts and machinery extend through all floors of a building, and besides, with the shaft filling with smoke, there are hundreds of other things that can go wrong, and probably will. Everyone tries to get on the elevator in an emergency. Fights break out and people get seriously injured. Smoke, heat, and fire do funny things to elevator call buttons, controls, and other complicated parts.

*Hotel guests in a New Orleans hotel were called on their room phones and notified of a fire on the upper floors. They were in no danger, but were asked to evacuate the hotel as a precaution. Five of the guests decided to use the elevator. It was discovered later that the elevator went down about three floors and then for some reason started going up. It did not stop until it reached the fire floor. The doors came open and were held open by smoke obscuring the photocell light beam. Next to the five guests in the elevator who died of suffocation, firemen noticed that every button had been pushed, probably in a frantic attempt to stop the elevator.*

*Elevators have killed many people, including firemen. Several New York firemen used an elevator when responding to a fire up on the 20th floor. They pushed 18, but the elevator went right on by the 18th floor. The doors opened on the 20th floor to an inferno and remained open long enough to kill all the firemen. The doors then closed and the elevator returned to the lobby.*

If you have any suspicion that there might be smoke or fire in your hotel, avoid the elevators like the plague.

# Jumping

It is important to say something about jumping because so many people do it. Most are killed or injured in the process. It is impossible to say whether or not you should jump. Every fire, although similar, is different. If you are on the first floor, you could just open the window and climb out. From the second floor you could probably make it with a sprained ankle, but you must jump out far enough to clear the building. Many people hit window sills and ledges on the way down, and they go into cartwheels. If you are any higher than the third floor, the chances are you won't survive the fall. You would probably be better off fighting the fire. Nearby buildings seem closer than they really are and many have died trying to jump to a building that looked a few feet away, but was actually three times that estimated distance. Panic is what causes most people to jump. Panic is what causes most people to jump.

*There was a fire in Brazil several years ago where 40 people jumped from windows and all 40 died. Ironically, 36 of those jumped after the fire was out.*

Many people have survived by staying put while those around them jumped to their deaths. If you resist panic and think clearly, you can use your own best judgment in such situations.

# Calling the Fire Department

Believe it or not, most hotels will not call the Fire Department until they have verified whether or not there really is a fire and tried to put it out themselves. Should you call the reception to report a fire, they will send someone who is not busy to investigate. Hotels are very reluctant to “disturb” their guests, and fire engines in the streets are quite embarrassing and tend to draw crowds.

*In a New Orleans hotel fire, records show that the Fire Department received only one call, from a guest in one of the rooms. The desk had been notified of fire twenty minutes earlier and sent a security guard to investigate. His body was later found on the twelfth floor, about ten feet from the elevator.*

If you want to report a fire or smell of smoke, ask the hotel operator for an outside line for a local call. Call the Fire Department and tell them your room number in case you need to be rescued. You need not feel embarrassed; that's what firemen are there for. Don't let hotel “policy” intimidate you into doing otherwise. The hotel may be a little upset with you, but really, it is better to be safe than sorry.

