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Robot butlers coming to downtown Miami hotel

Welcome to the 21st century, where a request for extra towels in your hotel room may be answered by a roughly 4-foot-high purple robot on wheels.

Miami YotelPad — an unfinished 30-story mixed-use development in downtown Miami — will employ three robot butlers for its guests. These robots don't look like humans (thankfully?), but they're programmed to execute tasks normally left to their biological counterparts: delivering room service, playing music and even engaging in conversation.

Singapore-based Techmetics built the 'bots. The company boasts that it also "employs" robots in casinos and hospitals at over 100 venues.

Two of the robots will serve condo residents and one will be available for hotel guests. The machines are fully automatic, using digital mapping to travel to and from rooms at about three miles per hour. They can even call the elevators. Outside their delivery duties, the robots can also act as a guide and escort wayward guests to their destinations. So far, they're unnamed, but YotelPad will soon host a social media competition to decide.

"We see these robots like we see our other technology: an enhancement that doesn't go too far," said David Ardit, the hotel's developer and principal of Aria Development Group. The company's other South Florida projects include the 321 Ocean luxury condo on South Beach and the Vista 12 workforce housing building in Little Havana.

Workers should have no fear: Robots aren't coming to take your jobs, Ardit says.

Other techy features at Yotel will include digital package delivery hubs, transit screens with real-time updates on Metromover and ride-share services, and self check-in kiosks.

A joint venture between Aria Development Group and the Kuwait-based AQARAT real estate company, Miami's micro-unit hotel will offer 231 condos and 222 hotel rooms ranging in size from 425 to 700 square feet. Construction on the project, at 227 NE Second St., is slated to finish late 2020.

Residences at YotelPad start at around \$300,000, with studio, one- and two-bedroom options. Property owners are allowed to rent out their properties short-term, either through third party services like Airbnb, or through Yotel's own short-term rental program.

Condo sales began in May and interest has been strong, said Peggy Olin Fucci, CEO and founder of OneWorld Properties, the project's broker. Amenities include a gym, bar, pet boutique and private rooftop space for residents only.

Miami isn't the first city to have a robot-inhabited Yotel. Yotel Boston is home to robot butler YO2D2, and the chain has robots at its locations in New York and Singapore, too.

The Starwood Aloft Hotel in Cupertino was the first to employ robot couriers, unveiling two in 2014, said Meghan Wood, editor at Oyster.com. They were a hit: In the first three months, the pair delivered 610 items to guests. Since then, several other hotels have brought in automatons. EMC2, an avant-garde boutique hotel in Chicago, has two. Henn-na Hotel in Japan is the first to be entirely staffed by robots and plans to expand to 100 locations within five years.

Savioke, the Santa-Clara based technology company that built the robots for Starwood, has robots in more than 70 hotels across the world.

Wood says robot butlers — like iPad checkins — are probably here to stay. She points to a 2014 survey by Software Advice that found that 51 percent of respondents preferred a robot deliver items to their rooms over a human.

"Guests at the Residences in LAX were ordering Starbucks to their rooms just to take a selfie with the robot butler," said Wood.

Miami's own experience with robots, though, hasn't been great. Brickell robot parking garage was a disaster, prompting the operators to pull out. At the annual eMERGE Americas tech conference in Miami, the keynote speaker, Sophia the Robot, never showed.

Xavier Gonzalez, then eMERGE CEO, playfully blamed the "South Beach" effect.

Fucci is unfazed, "People love the robots in other hotels. Their success in other locations is a big reason why we have them here."