

'The Hotel Collector'

Mike Thiel travels the world in search of unique lodging properties.

BY LEN VERMILLION

Mike Thiel laughs when asked about his nickname: "The King of the One Night Stand." He doesn't mind it, because it's something he's earned for reasons other than what you may be thinking. Thiel, founder and CEO of Hideaways International Inc. and Hideaways Aficionado Club, has visited more than 4,000 hotels as part of his job.

"I got used to it," he says of the nickname. "Yes, we get to do some neat things in neat places, but we're also working pretty hard on these trips."

The trips are scouting and research endeavors for his company, a travel club with 15,000 members (and growing) who rely on his property recommendations for not-to-be-missed vacations.

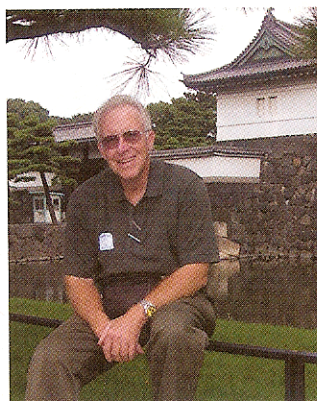
"For instance, for an upcoming trip to Mexico, we'll be up and down a 200-mile coast checking out properties in the seven days that we're there," he says.

It's those types of itineraries that have taken Thiel and his colleagues on a whirlwind tour of the world to check out good lodging properties for his clients. Through his job, combined with his youth as, what he describes as, a "foreign service brat," Thiel has been just about everywhere, although he's quick to point out that he still has "India and South Africa to cross off."

And the members of the travel group are thankful for his willingness to find unique vacation spots for them.

The travel club's membership includes a mixed bag of travelers seeking everything from adventure to luxury to relaxation. He describes the membership as a "a bit of a moving target." Historically, the group's membership has been solicited through direct mail. But nowadays, members mainly come from

Seeing the properties firsthand before recommending them is what has taken Thiel to about 250 to 300 hotels a year, earning him his nickname. Through the years, he's developed several of his own tricks for determining a hotel's attention to detail and service. His favorite is what he calls the "stray paper test."



partnerships with credit card companies, such as U.S. Bank and J.P. Morgan, which provide club membership as a perk.

Some of the members are notable celebrities, musicians, publishers, authors and politicians. However, Thiel says, the bulk are baby boomers ranging in age from the low-40s to the mid-60s. They are high net-worth individuals, with an average income of \$250,000 per year.

Hideaways International also markets a group of preferred properties to its membership. "These are properties we've inspected, so it's a very personalized service program," Thiel says. "We know a lot about the properties we work with."

MIKE THIEL'S INSPECTIONS OF LODGING PROPERTIES HAS TAKEN HIM TO FAR-FLUNG PLACES, INCLUDING TOKYO'S IMPERIAL GARDEN, ELEPHANT RIDING IN THAILAND AND THE KENTUCKY DERBY.

"Some places you might not expect are genuinely concerned with the tiniest of details," Thiel says. "For instance, you're on a tour with the general manager and he bends down to pick up the tiniest fleck of paper off the floor."

"We rate them on cleanliness, maintenance, service, restaurants, settings, activities, you name it," he continues.

And, the travel group's members get a good idea of what they're getting into when they plan their next getaway. ■