

The Boutique boom

For well-heeled globetrotters, hotel stays are no longer just about high thread count linen and 24-hour room service. Instead, they're looking for stylish, independent properties that offer unique experiences.

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FAING PAGE, FROM TOP
The grand entrance hall of the Petit Palais boutique hotel in Milan, which is housed within a converted 17th-century mansion, resembles a regal salon harking back to the art nouveau era; known for its gastronomic edge, One Leicester Street in London has one-Michelin star chef Tom Harris at the helm of its award-winning restaurant.

ABOVE
Local and organic produce features heavily at One Leicester Street hotel.

LEFT
Located within a five-storey Georgian building in London's Soho area, the hotel is uber contemporary with its minimalist, whitewashed room at One Leicester Street in London

BOUTIQUE HOTELS ARE ALL THE RAGE. THESE SMALL, INDEPENDENT ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS HAVE INCREASINGLY BEEN DOMINATING THE HOTEL SCENES OF MAJOR CITIES ACROSS THE WORLD. IN LONDON ALONE, 4,000 NEW LUXURY BOUTIQUE ROOMS HAVE BEEN CREATED SINCE 2005, WHILE IN NEW YORK UP TO A THIRD OF NEWLY-OPENED HOTELS ARE NOW BEING MARKETED AS "BOUTIQUE". AND THE SAME IS TRUE THROUGHOUT ASIA, WITH MAJOR CITIES SUCH AS SINGAPORE, HONG KONG AND TOKYO SEEING A SHARP RISE IN THE NUMBER OF NEW BOUTIQUE HOTELS.



So what exactly makes a hotel boutique and why has this trend been enjoying such startling success in recent years?

The definition of a boutique hotel is subjective. On their inception – widely considered to be in the early '80s, with the opening of The Blakes Hotel by hotelier and interior designer Anouska Hempel in London, and The Morgans Hotel by Ian Schrager in New York – boutiques could be clearly described as small, independent and unique. However, the rapid growth of the sector has seen far larger hotels, some with more

than 100 rooms, labelling themselves boutique, while there has also been a rise in "boutique" brands owned by gargantuan hotel chains, such as MGallery by Accor Hotels and Edition by Marriott. Even the independent boutique pioneers, Tim and Kit Kemp, based in London, have collaborated with hospitality giant Starwood to create the boutique brand W.

However, most boutiques still have their own definitions in mind. Richard Massey at Unlisted Collection Hotels (owners of the London boutique hotels One Leicester Street, 196 Bishopsgate and Town

Hall Hotel) says: "Standard hotels make the most of the overnight hospitality market, [but] boutique hotels create an intimate atmosphere. A small boutique hotel is full of charm. It's a home from home, allowing guests to really enjoy their time away."

Maddalena Fumagalli, Marketing Manager at Petit Palais in Milan, has her own thoughts about what differentiates boutiques from standard hotels. "Attention to detail that's almost obsessive, an intimate setting, themed furniture and a stylish manner," she claims.

Design is certainly an abiding theme of boutique

hotels with quirkiness and modern functionality topping the list. Star designers such as Philippe Starck, Patricia Urquiola and Marcel Wanders are now regularly employed on new boutiques. Unique settings are also characteristic of the sector, as demonstrated by properties like the Hotel im Wasserturm in Cologne, Germany, which is set within a converted water tower.

So now we know what defines a boutique – but why have they suddenly become so in vogue? Arthur Kiong, CEO of Far East Hospitality (which owns the newly-opened AMOY boutique hotel in



Talented Mr Fox, better known as TMF bar at One Leicester Street, was started by well-known bartender Matt Whiley as a pop-up residency but has since become a permanent fixture.

BELOW
Every element of the AMOY boutique hotel in Singapore bears a link to its glorious historic past and culture such as the dainty Chinese porcelain and guest amenities packaging.

BOTTOM
The double deluxe room at the latest 37-room AMOY, which is housed in a heritage conservation building in the Central Business District, preserves the original design characteristics.

Singapore's Amoy Street), believes it's about changing guest expectations.

"Today's travellers are getting increasingly savvy and expect more than just a comfortable stay when they travel," he says, "There is a growing group of guests who look for warm, intimate environments that tell a story. It is no longer about merely including designer furniture or unique locations alone. Rather, it is the whole package of delivering a holistic experience."

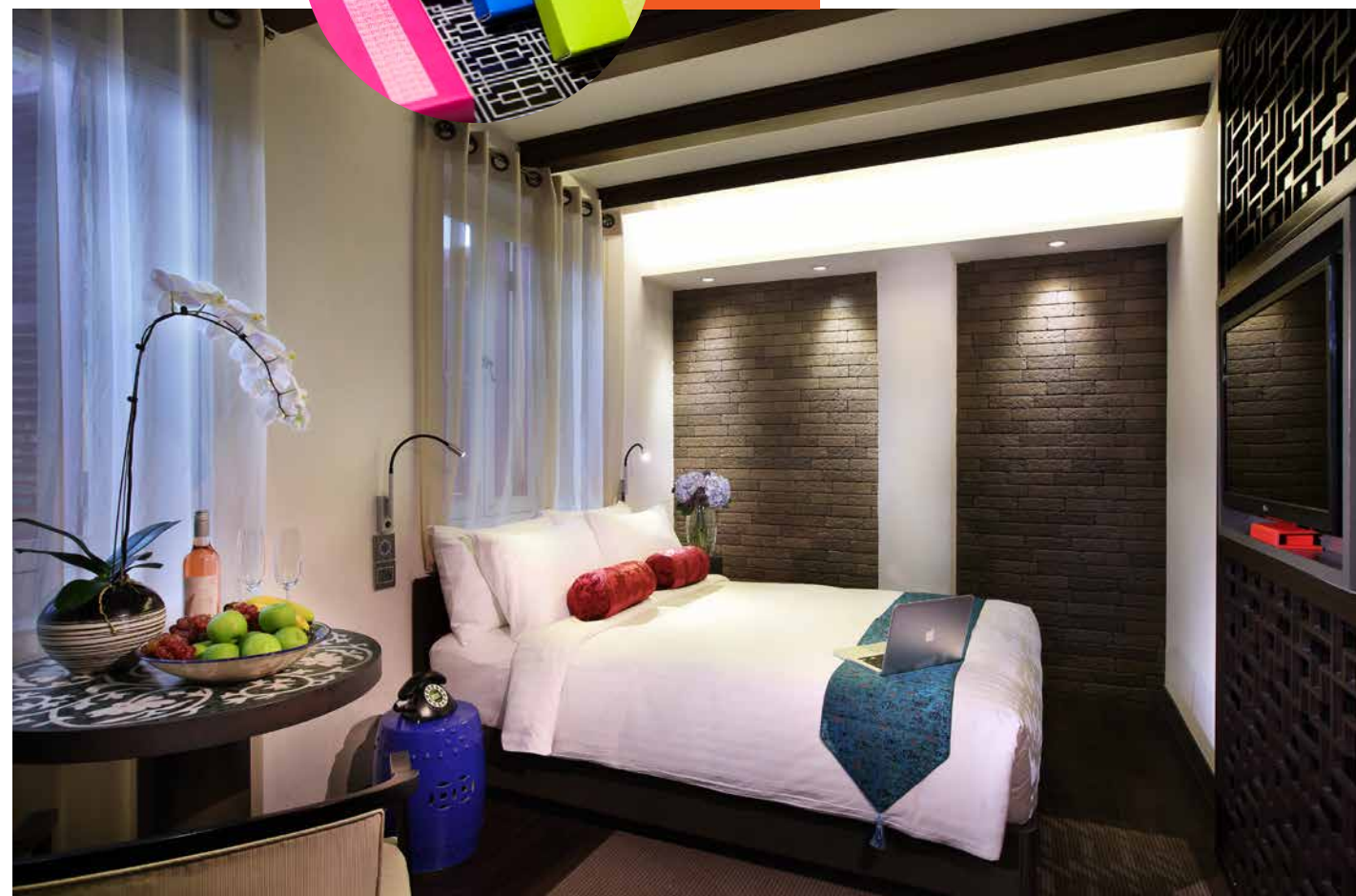
Kiong outlines how the AMOY manages this. "Our unique 37-room hotel provides our guests with an experience that is intimate and far beyond the typical city hotel," he enthuses. "We deliver bespoke experiences for each and every guest. This starts with the personalised transfer from the airport – just like how early migrants were picked up by their loved ones upon arrival on Singapore's shores. Then there's the entrance, which takes guests through the story of Singapore's early Chinese migrants. Besides, with our range of complimentary services like daily breakfast, newspapers, light refreshments and cocktails at the lobby's A'Del Bar, it's a complete package that we're delivering."

It's clear that personalised service today means more than just friendly butlers and helpful concierges. A number of indie hotels around the world are offering quirky services that set them apart. For example, Ace Hotel in London organises storytelling nights and radio residencies, while The Mark Hotel in New York boasts its own exclusive salon service

by the French master stylist Federic Fekkai.

So what does the future hold for boutique hotels? The general consensus is that the boutique boom will continue for some time yet, but there are different opinions about the specific developments that will take place. Massey believes the popularity of boutique hotels will increase as guests demand more local expertise. "A boutique will be measured by how true it remains to the area and location," he asserts, "by creating an intimate atmosphere headed by staff, who represent the area that guests are visiting."

But whatever the specific evolution of the sector, one thing is for sure: this boutique boom isn't over yet.



FOUR BEAUTIFUL BOUTIQUES

AMOY, SINGAPORE

This brand new 37-room hotel features the historic Fuk Tak Chi temple as its entrance leading up to the reception area, allowing guests to experience the story of Singapore's early Chinese immigrants.
stayfareast.com

ONE LEICESTER STREET, LONDON

This bare-bones boutique has everything a traveller needs, and nothing they don't. All of the 15 whitewashed rooms are minimalist masterpieces.
oneleicesterstreet.com

PETIT PALAIS, MILAN

Set within a 16th-century mansion, right at the heart of the city, the 18 individually-designed rooms and suites here are richly-decorated with arresting Italian artworks.
petitpalais.it

1888 HOTEL, SYDNEY

Inspired by photo sharing site Instagram, this hotel encourages guests to post photos of the fun, eclectic property. Those with more than 10,000 followers even get a free stay!
1888hotel.com.au