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ExecutiveLife | Hotels



URBAN HAVENS The lobby of Hotel Giraffe in New York (above) and Hotel Commonwealth in Boston (right)

Small Hotels, Big Personalities

Indie establishments serve up singular style (pillow menu anyone?) along with luxurious touches and 21st century amenities. **BY ANDREW BLUM**

I ONCE STAYED AT AN UNASSUMING little hotel in Paris tucked in an alleyway near the Seine. The rooms were decorated with playful mosaics, the hallways smelled of lavender, and in the mornings the manager himself served croissants and jam in the living room. I've been in enough Hampton Inns, Hyatts, and Sheratons since to pine for that place—or, at least, a hotel with similar character.

Turns out such hotels are getting easier to find, even without a passport. On several business trips around the U.S. recently, I've discovered, via a quick online search, some gems hidden in plain sight. They are islands of individuality in a homogenized world, featuring everything from the works of local artists (Hotel Max, Seattle)

and complimentary yoga classes (Hotel Vitale, San Francisco) to on-call Pilates workouts and a London-style taxi that shuttles guests to tourist attractions and business meetings (Hotel Ambrose, Santa Monica). Yet unlike many family-owned inns, they also offer 21st century amenities that business travelers want, such as Wi-Fi access (complimentary if you're lucky,) cordless phones, flat-screen TVs, and gourmet restaurants. The Hotel ICON in Houston, located in an historic bank building, features Bank Jean-Georges, created by renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten.



EYE CANDY (From left) A room at Seattle's Hotel Max, a terrace at the Ambrose Hotel in Santa Monica, and the entrance to Hotel Lucia in Portland, Ore.

At their best, they feel like the hospitality equivalent of the local farmers' market, connected to their communities and lovingly run, and the decor is not at all nostalgic (unlike all those chintz-spread-and-four-poster B&Bs channeling Queen Victoria). They're not really boutique hotels in the manner of Starwood's W brand or Kimpton Hotels, with their emphasis on a hopping lobby scene. Boutique doesn't necessarily mean unique anymore. And it definitely doesn't mean small, with some boutique properties boasting hundreds of rooms and convention-size public spaces.

"SOFT BRAND"

INSTEAD, CALL THEM indie hotels: hip places, unfettered by any brand, that make you feel like you're somewhere, not lost in a twilight zone of endless corridors with repeating doors. The indies, which tend to have fewer than 150 rooms, don't treat amenities as a checklist to fulfill but rather a chance to show off their personalities. "In the world of brand proliferation, the idea that something stands out and feels authentic and indigenous is really appealing," says Chip Conley,

chief executive of San Francisco-based Joie de Vivre Hospitality, a "soft brand" that owns the Vitale overlooking the Bay Bridge and 33 other hotels in California, each with its own name and carefully cultivated identity.

Another defining feature of indie hotels: They draw a large part of their clientele from Internet word of mouth. The people who seek out these places often turn to travel review sites such as tripad-

visor.com and citysearch.com, where the global village of online know-it-alls is always ready to flag a flaky concierge, poohpoo poor service, or gush over funky decor. Some 20% of Joie de Vivre's revenues come directly from bookings made via its Web site, which includes a short "matchmaker test" to help you choose a hotel in the chain that suits you. ("What kind of people do you most connect with? Fun-loving and energetic, serene and

Where To Stay...

Ambrose Hotel, Santa Monica
ambrosehotel.com
310 315-1555

Cultivates a homey, Asian-inspired vibe. \$189-\$245

Hotel Commonwealth, Boston
hotelcommonwealth.com
617 933-5000

Hotel-wide cordless phones and other high-tech amenities in the shadow of Fenway Park. \$215-\$485

Hotel Giraffe, New York
hotelgiraffe.com 212 685-7700
Small, stylish, and friendly in Manhattan with Art Deco-style rooms. \$339-\$625

Hotel ICON, Houston
hotelicon.com 713 224-ICON
Located in the landmark Union National Bank building with a Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant. \$179-\$350

Hotel Lucia, Portland, Ore.
hotellucia.com 503 225-1717
Contemporary design and Thai-food room service capture Portland's independent spirit. \$169-\$255

Hotel Max, Seattle
hotelmaxseattle.com
206 728-6299
Full of artwork by Seattle artists and quirky amenities. \$179-\$239

Hotel Preston, Nashville
hotelpreston.com 615 361-5900
An airport hotel with spunk, it's pet-friendly, too. \$109-\$159

Hotel San Jose, Austin
sanjosehotel.com 512 444-7322
A 1930s motel reimagined as a funky hangout for the local music industry, with lush gardens and vintage chairs. \$90-\$315

Hotel Vitale, San Francisco
hotelvitale.com 415 278-3700
Ideally situated across from the farmers' market at the Ferry Building. \$279-\$399



ROOM WITH A VIEW
Hotel Vitale in San Francisco (above and above left), one of 33 in the Joie de Vivre chain, offers vistas of the Bay Bridge. The Icon Hotel in Houston (left) boasts a Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant and unusual touches, such as brass door knockers

rooms. Each guest-room door was adorned with a unique photograph, which came in handy at the end of a long day when I reversed my room number and ended up on the wrong floor. (I knew that picture didn't look familiar....mine was a close-up of a woman's lips.) All this plus a good bed, flat-screen TV, \$11.95 a day wireless Internet

soulful....") As often as not, its guests are on business trips: Joie de Vivre reports a fifty-fifty split between business and leisure travelers.

TripAdvisor led me to the Hotel Max when I was planning a short visit to Seattle this summer. After typing in "Seattle hotels," I scrolled down past the W, Grand Hyatt, and Best Western before the Max popped up. When I saw it there, it seemed too good to be true: a stylish-looking place with plenty of amenities, located right in Seattle's downtown, for barely \$200 a night. The reviews, while overwhelmingly positive, revealed the catch: tiny rooms. But that was an acceptable trade-off for me, since I'd be traveling alone and, anyway, I'm accustomed to the tight confines of many New York City living spaces. I knew I couldn't count on frequent guest points, but in a way that was the idea: I wanted a unique experience, not a standardized one that

might someday earn me another standardized one. And I liked the stylishness, simplicity, and straightforwardness of the hotel's Web site.

After checking Google Maps to see if the hotel was close to where I needed to be in Seattle, I took one final step before booking it: I hit Google's "Satellite" button for a spaceship-eye view. You can tell a lot from an aerial photograph: Is the hotel on an urban thoroughfare or a suburban street? Is it surrounded by parking lots or parks? Is there a construction site across the street? This step may not be necessary if you're looking at the Hyatt or Sheraton, whose names alone typically convey something about their location, condition, and safety. But in the comparative wilds of indie hotels, a few extra clicks can't hurt.

LOST LIPS

THE MAX DIDN'T disappoint. It felt like Seattle, right down to the quirky touches (such as a menu of pillow choices) and original paintings by Seattle artists in the public spaces and on the walls of the

access that worked, and room-service breakfast that arrived right on time.

The moment that clinched it—and sold me on the advantages of ducking the brands—came while checking out. Knowing I wouldn't be heading to the airport until late that night, I inquired whether my 24-hour pass for Internet access would work throughout the day. No, the reception clerk said. But then the bellman stage-whispered the password for the lobby's wireless network, and we all giggled. Problem solved.

When I related the experience to Howard Jacobs, chief operating officer of Aspen Hotel Group in Portland, Ore., which owns the Max, he said the gesture wasn't as spontaneous as it might have seemed. No, the Max doesn't have a policy of revealing passwords. But it does make sure the staff is empowered, at all levels. "They have a broad range of autonomy," Jacobs says. As do business travelers choosing hotels. ■

BusinessWeek online For a slide show of indie hotels, go to businessweek.com/extras