

Chic Boutique Hotels

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Back in the '90s, guests knew what to expect when checking into a "boutique" hotel: cutting-edge design, gorgeous staff, fewer rooms than the big chains, and the city's hottest bars and restaurants no farther than the lobby.

Today, with the travel industry slapping the "boutique" label on mid-market franchises and 200-room boxes, it seems to have become little more than a marketing gimmick. Companies such as Starwood Hotels and Resorts (nyse: HOT - news - people) and Canada's Germain Group are taking style to the masses with the launch of their new cheap-chic chains, Aloft Hotels and Alt Hotels, respectively, but that doesn't do much good for the boutique hotel's exclusive image.

"The term 'boutique' is greatly overused and, as a result, is often confused and misconstrued," said Imran Hussain, media relations manager for London-based myhotels, which operates small-scale, design-focused hotels in the city's fashionable Chelsea and Bloomsbury neighborhoods. "Unfortunately it seems to have become a buzzword of sorts, no longer meaning quirky or independent but now served with a more mass-marketed approach."

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