

You are where you stay - By Daniel Edward Craig

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While in Safeway the other day to purchase laundry detergent I was so overwhelmed by the array of choices I almost left without buying anything. How did the simple process of purchasing laundry soap become a highly emotional, self-defining exercise? My conscience told me I should go with the eco-friendly choice, but part of me really wanted my clothes to smell Tide Mountain Fresh(TM). 'WHY PAY MORE?' shouted the ABC label-a valid point, but did I want to be seen at checkout with that tacky box? A myriad of other benefits screamed for my attention. Dawn Stainscrubbers(TM)! Colorguard(TM)! All Stainlifters(TM)! If I made the wrong choice, would glaciers melt and whites turn pink? What if I wanted all the features? That option didn't appear to be available. I was forced to choose what was most important to me.

This constant one-upmanship among brands, the relentless quest for 'New and Improved!' features, has made what used to be simple purchase decisions highly complex. Hotels are no exception. There used to be three types of hotels-budget, mid-range and luxury-and you made your decision based on location and price. Things started to get complicated in the 1980s. That's when somebody realized that all hotel lobbies don't have to be made of brass and marble, all guestrooms don't have to be beige, and all lobby bars don't have to be boring. We can thank Ian Schrager and Philippe Starck for leading the revolution.

Since then, boutique hotels have become enormously popular, but because of higher pricing and urban locations the market has been mostly restricted to young and affluent big-city travellers. All that is changing with the next generation of boutique hotels: the soon-to-be ubiquitous 'lifestyle hotel'. Ironically, whereas boutique hotels were created as an alternative to chain hotels, this segment is being driven by the chains. In an attempt to recapture lost business and to capture new business, the chains are bringing the boutique concept to the masses. Lifestyle hotels cater to the traveler who wants to pack more than his PJs when going on the road, he wants to take his entire lifestyle: technology, health and wellbeing, social life, dog and even eco-friendly practices.

One of these chains is aloft hotels. With its promise of 'urban-influenced design, accessible technology, style and a social atmosphere', the concept sounds like a cheap knockoff of W Hotels, and it is-except Starwood had the foresight to do it themselves. W was the first to turn the boutique concept into a chain, and now they're repackaging their highly successful product into what appears will be a cheaper, more accessible and more generic version.

Starwood is also introducing element, an extended-stay chain inspired by Westin Hotels. Whereas contemporary boutique hotels emphasize the hedonistic lifestyle, element targets the health-minded and socially conscious traveler. Earlier promotions touted low-flow sinks and toilets, eco-friendly materials, low-energy light bulbs, and shampoo and conditioner dispensers to help guests recycle, conserve and maintain a lower impact lifestyle on the road, although these features are not currently listed on the website. Progressive and commendable ideas, but shouldn't all hotels be doing this these days?

The third lifestyle chain worth noting is Edition, which brings together a highly improbable duo: Bill Marriott and Ian Schrager. A recent media release says Edition will 'will reflect changing lifestyles and cater to a vast, underserved market of guests expecting and in turn demanding a unique experience, not merely a place to sleep. The properties, while distinct, will all emphasize good design, quality, originality, authenticity and character, while delivering impeccable, modern and gracious personalized service.' A tall order, but with Schrager leading the concept, design, marketing and food and beverage and Marriott overseeing development and operations, Edition will undoubtedly be a strong performer.

It's interesting to note that in August 2006, around the time the incredible Gramercy Park Hotel opened, Schrager told USA Today, 'You know when Marriott is doing it that it's time to move on.' We'll give this brilliant man the benefit of the doubt and assume he's come on board to change this perception.

Like boutique hotels, lifestyle hotels will be small (under 200 rooms), but whereas contemporary boutique hotels tend to be located in big cities, lifestyle hotels will focus primarily on secondary markets: smaller cities, outskirts and suburbs. Bizarrely, the first aloft and element properties, expected to open later this year, are being built next door to each other in Lexington, Massachusetts. Almost 75 aloft hotels are currently under development whereas Starwood anticipates 500 element hotels worldwide. Edition, announced only in January, is trailing behind, but intends to go international from the outset, with the first hotel expected in 2010.

So, much like buying a cup of coffee, a car or laundry detergent, choosing a hotel is about to become a much more complex process, one that will reveal as much about your budget as who you are.

And in case you were wondering, I went with Tide Mountain Fresh(TM). My clothes smell really, really nice.

About The Author

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