

Cool hotels that take no prisoners

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From solitary confinement to champagne - former jailhouses that rock

If an inmate of Her Majesty's Prison in Oxford were to pay a return visit to his former clink today, he might come away wishing he'd committed his crime 40 years later. The castle-like walls, built for William the Conqueror in 1071, remain, as do the three-inch-thick steel doors in the cell blocks. But the prison's name has been changed to the Malmaison and conditions have improved dramatically. The House of Correction gym features has state-of-the-art exercise equipment, and high tea, not corporeal punishment, is served up in the visitor's room.

It was in 2005 that the Malmaison hotel chain turned the oldest prison in Britain into one of the classiest boutique hotels in the county. Instead of changing the old look, the designers created a jail house theme by keeping the wrought iron stairwell and many of the original jail bars and bare brick walls. To this, they added sleek touches of modern (free) living, such as soft mood lighting and original pieces of art. The dining area is now a chic brasserie with a menu featuring steak tartare and fillet of sea bass, and the old cells feature plasma TVs, heated slate-stone bathrooms, plush velvet curtains and fully stocked mini-bars.

For the Malmaison and other prisons-turned-hotels, guests are no longer required to do the crime to do the time. They simply pay top dollar to enjoy top-notch service from a crew of concierges, not a pack of prison guards. By no means is this a British trend. Jails, prisons and correctional facilities from Helsinki to Cape Town are being converted into hotels and guesthouses, and even budget lodges. In the United States at least two former jails are now hotels and three others have become small town bed & breakfasts.

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