

The Deluxe Chains Want to Be Chic, Too

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Long a five-star fuddy-duddy, Le Méridien has entered a more glamorous phase. Flush with cash since 2005 from its new American owners - the Starwood Hotels and Resorts group - and eager to exert its presence beyond the Continent, Le Méridien, a European luxury brand, is moving from stodgy to sexy.

A 'cultural curator,' Jérôme Sans, founder of Paris's exhibition space Palais de Tokyo, has been retained by the hotel to oversee a range of amenities, including creating programs with six institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Mr. Sans is also developing in-house amenities like business breakfast menus by the celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, specialty Illy coffee drinks, and a Méridien scent, LM01, by the French perfume company Le Labo.

'We're trying to create a chic culture of discovery,' said Eva Ziegler, senior vice president for Le Méridien brand, 'where the sophistication of art, architecture and cuisine are available to travelers in a way that is subtle yet refined.'

While its efforts may be aggressive, Le Méridien is hardly the only deluxe chain rolling out amenities to woo coveted business travelers away from artsy independent hotels or ultraluxury brands like the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts or the Ritz-Carlton. In particular, deluxe chains are seeking the loyalty of a younger, more mobile and cosmopolitan - and far more fickle - road warrior, whose appetite for sophistication is equaled by a need for efficiency.

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