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Hotel as Lifestyle

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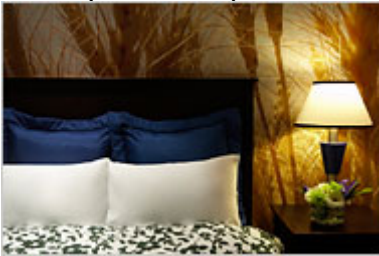


Hyatt Hotels and Resorts

The lobby of the Hyatt Place in Lombard, Ill. is defined by comfortable seating areas.

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What [Starbucks](#) did for coffee and [JetBlue](#) did for air travel, a growing number of new hotel brands is trying to do for the overnight stay: create an experience that offers something different from the status quo, then replicate it around the globe.



InterContinental Hotels Group

A room at the Hotel Indigo in Ottawa aims for natural serenity.

While some of these new brands are filling holes in the portfolios of major hotel companies like InterContinental, [Starwood](#) and Hyatt, others are being developed from scratch. Called “branded boutiques” or “lifestyle hotels” (labels that make some hoteliers cringe), the goal is to combine the design sensibility and character of a boutique hotel

with the marketing and operational advantages of a brand.

Or as one hotel executive, James Anhut, of [InterContinental Hotels Group](#), put it, “Travelers can stay in a cool hotel and earn their Priority Club frequency points, too.”

InterContinental introduced its Hotel Indigo brand in Atlanta in late 2004 and has since opened others in seven more cities, including Chicago, Dallas and Scottsdale, Ariz.

Intended to be bright and inviting — blue and other primary colors dominate the color palette — every Hotel Indigo shares features like hardwood floors and bathrooms with a glass-enclosed shower. Each hotel’s designer had some leeway to create a localized look for the brand, albeit without straying into the exclusive feel that was rejected by some travelers during the heyday of hip hotels.

“We’re trying to bring boutique to a more mainstream broad audience,” Mr. Anhut said. “We kind of ‘democratize design,’ if you will.”

Many of Hotel Indigo’s competitors are trying to accomplish the same thing, but with slightly different interpretations.

According to the consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, hotel companies have

introduced nearly 30 brands since the beginning of 2005, a development fueled by easy access to capital, high occupancy rates and the growing influence of younger travelers with different tastes. Although not all of these brands fit the same mold — Hilton's Waldorf-Astoria Collection, for example, is an extension of the original New York luxury hotel — most aim to offer guests some type of "experience," the buzzword cited most often.

Bjorn Hanson, global hospitality leader for PricewaterhouseCoopers, said that experience is mostly being aimed at younger generations, with more natural materials and fabrics, food geared toward "grazing" rather than dining, a greater emphasis on technology and common areas that offer guests a variety of places to congregate. (Even when tethered to their laptops, Mr. Hanson says, younger travelers seek out social environments more than their elders.)

Yet he emphasized that most of these new brands are not trying to emulate the social scene or urban design of Starwood's W hotels, widely credited with pushing the industry in a more stylish direction.

"W kind of set the path in one way, but these new brands are attempting to make it a more populous, inclusive orientation," he said.

Jim Abrahamson, a senior vice president with Hyatt Hotels, likened the atmosphere at the company's new Hyatt Place hotels to a neighborhood cafe. In place of a traditional lobby and bar, Hyatt Place hotels have an area called the Gallery, which offers a coffee and wine cafe, a nook with a television and armchairs and a variety of seating options, including a communal table.

"We created our Gallery area to be very highly targeted to our female [business travelers](#)," Mr. Abrahamson said, citing Hyatt research showing that guests, although not wanting to feel like prisoners in their rooms, were often reluctant to sit alone at a bar. For those who do seek solitude, each guest room has what Hyatt calls the "cozy corner," featuring a sectional sofa and ottoman.

The first Hyatt Place hotel opened in Lombard, Ill., last August and now the brand is in about 20 other locations, including Atlanta, Cincinnati, Denver and Nashville. Like Hotel Indigo, Hyatt Place is mostly situated in secondary cities and suburban or airport markets — places that generally do not now offer business travelers many options.

Both InterContinental and Hyatt have aggressive expansion plans. [InterContinental has 40 additional Hotel Indigo locations planned](#), and Hyatt aims to open 120 Hyatt Place hotels by the end of the year — all renovations of existing properties, though Hyatt plans some new construction in the future.

Starwood, too, has new brands in the works: Aloft, which is aimed at carrying W's feel to smaller cities and suburban markets, and Element, an extended-stay hotel based on Starwood's Westin brand.

Hotel Indigo, Hyatt Place and Aloft all fit into what is known in the industry as "select service" hotels, which means that they lack some of the amenities of a full-service hotel, like a restaurant that serves three meals a day. The select service hotels are generally priced lower than their full-service counterparts, with rates ranging from roughly \$100 to \$200 a night.

The first Aloft hotels are being built in Lexington, Mass.; Philadelphia; and at San Francisco International Airport and are scheduled to open in early 2008. The hotels have rooms with 9 1/2-foot ceilings, flat-screen TVs that can connect to a laptop, a parking lot encircled by an exercise trail and social spaces aimed at encouraging mingling.

"It's all geared toward making each night satisfying and memorable versus generic or an apology," said Ross Klein, president of Starwood's luxury brands group. The company's Element brand has a similar goal, but will feature larger rooms with kitchens, a full fitness center and in-room office space intended for guests staying an average of five nights. The first Element hotel will open in Lexington, Mass., in 2008.

While many of the new brands are part of larger hotel groups, some are being developed by start-ups like NYLO Hotels, which plans to open its first hotel in Plano, Tex., in December and aims for 50 locations by 2010.

NYLO has many of the same ingredients as its competitors: a loftlike design (guest rooms will have 11-foot ceilings and exposed brick walls); more social spaces, including a library and a game room, and a localized style — for example, cowhide and antlers in Texas and a more nautical look in Warwick, R.I.

Industry experts say there is little doubt that travelers will welcome some new options, especially in the cities where many of these companies are building hotels.

"They're all going after the same general market," said Mark Johnson, publisher of the blog [HotelChatter.com](#). He added that better service is the real ingredient necessary to ensure a brand's success.

"They can't just throw a 42-inch [plasma](#) TV, an [iPod](#) dock and some barely functioning WiFi into the room, launch 100 hotels and have it work," he said. "Guests also want the service they never found at some of these boutique hotels."