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At Chic Hotels, You Can Take It With You

Guests Are Buying What They Slept On, Ate Off and Saw on the Walls

By Michael S. Rosenwald
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Jennifer Candotti's husband recently gave her a gift: a quiet night away from him and their baby in a Bethesda hotel.

"It was such a great night," she said. "I was by myself. I was so, so comfortable."

The next morning, she reflected on what made her feel so cozy -- the featherbed mattress pad, the down comforter, the feather and down pillow, the 300-thread-count sheets and even the bed skirt, because it matched so nicely. Ultimately, her stay produced sensations associated with royalty. "I just didn't want it to end," she said.

It didn't have to. Candotti went back to her home in Brookeville, in northern Montgomery County, and did something thousands of hotel guests now do every day: She logged on to the hotel's Web site and went shopping. She ordered, for \$1,500, just about everything her body touched. By the end of the week she had the goods, which she used to turn her guest room into a hotel at home.

The days of hotel guests stealing Ritz-Carlton towels are gone. Now they just buy the room or even the lobby -- the shower curtains, the lamps, the carpet, the chairs, the chaises, the desks, the TVs, the beds, the bedding, the soap, the dishes, the flatware and pricey artwork on the wall. The hotels sell all this in an effort to tap into the dreams of the American consumer, who has already been rapidly trading up to other high-end products such as \$60 bottles of vodka, \$200 designer jeans and pricey chocolate.

"Hotels are probably the best design showrooms for beds and home furnishings that exist right now," said Ross Klein, president of W Hotels, a division of Starwood Hotels. "People can experience luxury with us for a night or two, then decide what they want for their home. You know, it's awfully hard to spend the night at Bloomingdale's."

Among the furnishings being bought and sold are Marriott's red acrylic teardrop lamp (\$190) and Kashwere Chenilla chaise (\$1,795). From Westin Hotels and Resorts, guests can buy a California king-size bed (\$1,450) and the Heavenly shower curtain and liner (\$35). The W Hotel has acrylic I-beam side tables (\$290 each). The Nine Zero Hotel in Boston is offering a Macassar veneer desk (\$3,600), a pair of wall sconces (\$2,400) or an 18-by-18-foot area rug from the lobby (\$14,000).

For many guests, staying at a fancy hotel is an introduction to sophisticated interior design and how it can translate to living a certain lifestyle, said Joanne Kravetz, who chairs the interior design department at the Art Institute of California in Los Angeles. They check out of the room but keep a lifestyle -- of the hip, urban W Hotel or the clean and modern Marriott or the cosmopolitan haven of Boston's Nine Zero.

"The hotel has now brought that lifestyle into your realm of reality," Kravetz said. "You can have this. There's no barrier in between. You don't need a decorator. You don't need a designer. And for the hotels, this is just another way for you to plunk down some money and have what you want if you want it."

Direct-to-consumer hotel merchandise sales topped \$60 million last year, according to Hospitality Design magazine, and industry observers think that figure will grow quickly, with several companies popping up to market and sell furnishings for hotels, which can then focus exclusively on guests.

Already, the W Hotel in New York has taken the trend further, opening a store in Manhattan where guests can buy

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furnishings right off the shelves. Westin recently began selling its custom-designed Speakman dual showerhead -- five adjustable jets, providing light mist to massaging needles -- through Nordstrom. Price: \$130.

"The interest in our furnishings has just been overwhelming," said Thomas Holtmann, the operations manager at Nine Zero, where rooms run upward of \$400 a night. "Hotels used to be a nice home away from home. Now guests feel like they want to take our ideas home with them."

How did this happen? Hotel observers say the boom probably has its roots in the late-1990s emergence of boutique hotels, particularly the cool but affordable properties designed by Ian Schrager, who reinvented New York nightlife with Studio 54 before he turned his eye toward hotels. Boutique hotel rooms were designed by leading interior designers, so a guest in town from Iowa City could feel treated, for the night, to the style of Warhol.

Boutique hotel popularity cut into the bottom lines of big hotel chains, which had for years concentrated on consistency of furnishings, ignoring design to increase functionality. Only recently are the big chains catching up by launching broad redesigns of their brands and rooms. New Marriott rooms, for instance, have granite countertops in the bathrooms, rich wood interiors, ergonomic chairs and the latest in luxury bedding, right down to the \$155 duvet cover that Candotti purchased for her home.

Now the hotel world is all about lifestyle decor, industry observers say, which from a sales perspective happens to dovetail seamlessly with the aspirations of the American consumer willing to spend a little more to live the good life. With less than 6 percent of the population using interior designers, the hotels have plenty of room to serve as arbiter of chic home styles.

"This is for a segment of the population that can afford to stay at a really nice hotel, just not every weekend," said Sarah Bates, vice president of Hoteluxury, a company that is selling boutique hotel furnishings to the masses. "It's a special occasion for them, a little slice of luxury, which now they can feel every day right in their own homes."

The demand has been percolating for some time.

"We've always had guests approach us and ask about furnishings in their rooms, where they could get them and so on," Holtmann said. "Who designed it? Where could they get the same thing for their house? I've had people ask quite a few times about our copper curtains."

But much of the furnishings and bedding in hotel rooms is custom-made for hotels and therefore difficult if not impossible to find where one might normally look.

"I looked all over," Candotti said. "Bed Bath & Beyond. Linens 'n Things. I couldn't find the same stuff. Nothing was quite right. Nothing was as good as what was in the hotel."

So she went to Marriott's Web site and bought it.

The hotel chain contracts the work to acquire the products and maintain the Web site through a company called Hotels At Home. In Nine Zero's case, the boutique hotel was the first customer of Hoteluxury, a Boston company.

Hoteluxury sent a SWAT team of photographers into Nine Zero for four days.

"We photographed everything in the public spaces -- wine glasses, cutlery, sconces, furniture," Bates said. "Everything in the hotel that a guest might naturally want. Then we worked with the interior designers to find the sources for all the products. We set up vendor relationships with them and contracts to sell their products."

Some hotels decide what to sell based on what guests try to steal.

"You know how Mary Poppins has that carpet bag and pulls out a bird cage?" asked Klein, the W Hotel president. "You'll be amazed what people still try to steal from hotels. We had a guest walk out of our Union Square property with a 60-inch leather-wrapped lamp. I don't know how he did that, but we were happy to add this to the guest's bill and we knew we had to add it to the catalogue."

As for Candotti, she has made up her guest bedroom with all the bedding she enjoyed at the Bethesda Marriott Hotel. Her in-laws, visiting from Italy, find the products just as comfy as she did. "It looks really nice and doesn't look like they are staying in grandma's bare bedroom," Candotti said. "They don't spend enough time in there, but they love it."

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