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THE LUXURY TRAVEL CLUB FROM TRAVEL WEEKLY



FRANCE

Champagne, châteaux and luxury stays await across the Channel

PHILIPPINES

The far-flung idyll clients will want to book for the future

YACHT CHARTERS

Why a private voyage is the ultimate post-Covid trip

TRAVELWEEKLY



BOUTIQUE HOTELS

The appeal of little gems

The pandemic has made small-scale hotels even more popular. [Erica Bush](#) reports

Boutique hotels have long been a mainstay of the luxury travel sector. Petite in nature, they offer an appealing mix of privacy, intimacy and personalised service; all increasingly sought-after factors for affluent travellers.

But, as the coronavirus pandemic took hold last year, the boutique hotel model looked under threat. Without the backing of corporate hotel chains, and amid mass shut-downs and cancellations, many feared they might not survive.

Far from crumbling, the majority of boutique hotels have managed to find innovative ways to thrive, and, as the world emerges from one of the worst crises in modern times, they look well set to lead the revival of luxury travel.

Rising demand

Companies such as Relais & Châteaux, whose very concept is built on the boutique

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hotel model, are seeing an uplift in interest, particularly within the domestic market. General manager Anthony Torkington says: “2021 has already surpassed 2019 in terms of bookings, so there’s a definite desire for more intimate hotel experiences that offer ample space both inside and out.”

In Switzerland, chocolate-box chalet Ultima Gstaad, home to just 11 suites and six residences, reported a 677% increase in bookings in March and April this year compared with the same period in 2020. The property has even had to extend its 2021 season to accommodate the influx of interest.

Boutique hotels are also proving the favoured stay of choice in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Collection’s Manor House Concepts reported a “significant increase in enquiries” across its four properties (including flagship The Kandy House), →



Santani Wellness
Resort & Spa, Sri Lanka



Lake House, Australia



while Santani Wellness Resort & Spa said overall occupancy for March and April was up 24% and 27% respectively, compared to around 5% for other hotels. "I've spoken to many UK tour operators and travel agents over the last year and there's definitely a belief that clients will be more attracted to the idea of staying in smaller hotels as a result of Covid-19," says Eleanor Milner, director of The Sri Lanka Collection. "The interest in this type of high-end boutique hotel continues to grow."

Even larger hotel brands are witnessing the trend. At Nobu Hospitality, it's 16-room Nobu Ryokan Malibu that is stealing the show. "The concept of privacy and personal space is more prevalent than ever, and we have continued to see a surge in enquiries for Nobu Ryokan throughout the pandemic, owing to its special location and small number of accommodations," says Rachael Palumbo, vice-president of sales and marketing.

Survival of the fittest

Like 'unprecedented' and 'pent-up demand', 'pivot' has become an all-too-familiar phrase of the pandemic. But it's an accurate way to describe how boutique hotels have survived in the past 18 months, with many looking at alternative ways to retain staff, break even and preserve their business for future travel.

Luxury Lodges of Australia property Lake House in Victoria – one of the states hardest hit by tough lockdown restrictions – created jobs at its neighbouring regenerative farm to retain valued members of staff.

Others have introduced new programmes and experiences to coincide with their reopening. Family-run boutique hotel group Maisons Pariente introduced a new spa partnership at its 34-room Lou Pinet property in St Tropez, and a new chef and experiences at its sister hotel Crillon Le Brave in Provence.

Many hotels also used last year's

downtime to give themselves a facelift.

The 53-suite Saxon Hotel in Johannesburg – where Nelson Mandela stayed in its former incarnation as a private home – updated its reception area, cigar library, restaurant and bar, while Villa Lena, the rural hotel and artists' residency high up in the Tuscan hills, added six en suite bedrooms and a new restaurant.

In with the new

Covid-19 hasn't frightened off newcomers either; a slew of luxury boutique hotels opened in the past year – fearless in the face of the pandemic.

The much-talked-about Kalesma Mykonos opened in April with 25 whitewashed villas tumbling down a slope to Ornos Bay. In Bordeaux, Château Troplong Mondot wine estate added a boutique hotel, The Keys of Troplong Mondot, featuring four individually designed suites and a two-bedroom

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