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A Once-in-a-Lifetime Splurge

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THE GETAWAY | STEPHANIE ROSENBLIOM

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Splurge

A look at the latest in luxurious hotel suites.

LE DÔME, a nearly 900-square-foot suite in Le Cinq Codet in the heart of Paris, is named for its striking views of the golden Dôme des Invalides, under which Napoleon is entombed. But if that vista doesn't grab you, wander over to the other end of the private terrace, past a half-dozen deck chairs (all yours) and gaze at the Eiffel Tower. And should you grow tired of that, there is always the Jacuzzi, from which you can look out over the mansard rooftops of the Seventh Arrondissement and polish off the Champagne and chocolates that were left while you were out. Inside there's a couch shaped like a croissant, a curved OLED television, two bathrooms, a dressing room and a tub ringed with white rose petals.

As for the bill, it starts at about \$2,000 a night. Don't raise an eyebrow. Le Dôme (or the "prestige suite" online) is one of the more affordable luxury suites to be found these days. Consider the new Imperial Suite at the St. Regis Dubai, which starts at about \$20,500 a night. Or the Katara Suite at Excelsior Hotel Gallia in Milan, from around \$22,000 a night. Or the more than 12,000-square-foot penthouse at the Mark Hotel in Manhattan, which can be yours for some \$75,000 a night. That, incidentally, is about the amount of money researchers at Princeton said one needs to earn in a year to be maximally happy.

Are such rooms worth the price?

Some hotels are betting on it. Luxury spending among affluent households in the United States was predicted to spike by 6.6 percent over the past year, according to the 2015 Survey of Affluence and Wealth from Time Inc. and YouGov, a market research company. "Spending among one-percenters is at unprecedented levels," the study said. Even millennial travelers are spending: 45 percent are willing to pay more for true luxury in lodging, according to the 2015 Portrait of American Travelers from MMGY Global, a travel and hospitality marketing firm. From the United States to Hong Kong, the most robust hotel sectors today are economy and luxury.

"Our political and economical evolution are literally tied to the hotel industry," said Parag Vohra, general manager of hotels for Sojern, a travel technology company. When the middle class was rising, so were middle-tier hotels. "Now as we hollow out in the middle," he said, "you effectively have lodging doing very well at the high end or bottom."

For those seeking the former, there's a



GREY HOLLAND FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE HILTON HOTEL COMPANY LLC

Above, the Kipling Suite at Brown's Hotel in London. At right, from top: luxurious suites in Paris, Milan, Dubai and Grand Cayman.

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new booking site for luxury suites. Suiteness.com, which is funded by investors, including Structure Capital and Keystone Capital, went live last year with more than 5,000 suites in 15 Las Vegas hotels. Since then it has added suites in Los Angeles, Miami and New York. London suites are coming. To use the site, you must sign up. A recent search for a room in Los Angeles turned up 163 suites with starting nightly rates between \$316 and \$25,000 — a vast range. And that brings us to a fundamental question: What constitutes a suite?

Words like “suite” and “luxury” mean different things in different cultures, places and contexts. Indeed, the word suite wasn’t always associated with luxury. “It was an upgrade,” Mr. Vohra said. “A more spacious product. But not luxury.”

The idea of luxury itself varies globally. In the West it generally means understated elegance (subdued colors, lots of daylight), said Mr. Vohra, whose hotel experience includes stints with Wyndham International and Marriott International. In Asian and Middle Eastern countries, he said, luxury is typically about opulence and service; having staff members tending to you in your room or escorting you to a restaurant, as they would at the Oberoi Udaivillas in Udaipur, India.

In other words, a luxury suite is not just about the physical room; it carries alongside it prestige and a certain caliber of service. In March, for example, Rocco Forte Hotels announced a three-tier suites program. Guests of the highest level, the Forte Suites, are picked up at the airport and taken to their suite — which is filled with their favorite items such as flowers — for a private check-in. Among the first Forte Suites is the new Kipling Suite at Brown’s Hotel in London, where rates start at \$8,938 a night (including the value added tax).

“Luxury has never been just about space,” Mr. Vohra said. “To conflate luxury with space is to undermine luxury.”

This is why the word “suite” is elastic. It might be six rooms or it might be one room. It might be 500 square feet or 9,000 square feet. There could be a terrace with sweeping vistas, or no outdoor space at all. The bill might run you \$20,000 a night or \$200 a night. Last year, the Hilton Chicago O’Hare Airport introduced 485-square-foot “family suites” — one room — starting at \$134 a night. The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead, in Georgia last year renovated two of its suites and both start at \$479. You would be wise to look at the particulars of the room before you



MR. BULLA

book to ensure that your idea of a suite is the same as the hotel’s.

For many travelers, \$479 a night is a splurge or downright impossible. For some, it’s a steal, and infinitely less preferable than the Sterling Suite at the Langham, London — a penthouse with a piano, media lounge and a 24-hour personal butler — which starts at nearly \$35,000 a night. However much you’re considering plunking down, the question is: If you’re going to pay up, what’s the payoff?

Six years ago I wrote about how social scientists found that spending money on an experience, such as a vacation, makes people happier in the long run than spending

money on objects like a watch or a piece of furniture. The logic is that humans are highly adaptable; we quickly become used to things, and with time they lose their allure. And as some researchers have pointed out, another person can have, say, the same watch as you, which makes yours less special.

That doesn’t happen with experiences. Experiences are unique. Even when they are shared, you interpret them in your own way. You own them forever. Indeed, researchers have found that reminiscing, reliving scenes that brought you joy, also boosts happiness.

Which brings us back to the logic of

The private terrace of Le Dôme, a nearly 900-square-foot suite at Le Cinq Codet hotel in Paris. It has a large living room, two bathrooms and a Jacuzzi, and starts at about \$2,000 a night.

spending big bucks for a luxurious suite. For instance, if you had a spare \$5,000 or so, you could have a gathering in the Guest-House at the Dream Downtown hotel in Manhattan, a 2,500-square-foot duplex penthouse suite with a terrace that was introduced last year. It has a fireplace, an outdoor shower and a glass-bottom Jacuzzi that can be seen from the suite’s living room below (consider yourself warned). A “vibes curator” can help create a party playlist or procure hors d’oeuvres.

It’s, well, ostentatious. Can such a thing translate to happiness?

I’ve never spoken with a scholar who made an academic case for a \$5,000 hotel room. But if you’re thinking about a once-in-a-lifetime night, consider how different suites deliver different experiences.

Sometimes, the experience you want most is the one that costs (slightly) less. Take the Shangri-La Hotel in Paris, which has about three dozen suites. A recent search for a room with a terrace in May turned up a 750-square-foot “duplex Eiffel Tower view suite” for about \$2,700 a night with no outdoor space. Also available was a 535-square-foot room (not a suite), known as a “terrace Eiffel Tower view” room, with a private terrace and views of the tower for about \$1,500 a night — that’s more than \$1,000 cheaper than the suite at a loss of a mere 215 square feet. Some people might miss those square feet. But if I had \$1,500 to throw around, I’d take the regular room with the terrace.

Obviously your dollars can be put to nobler use than a fancy hotel suite. But let’s say you’ve saved some money to have fun with. Perhaps you might consider splurging on a very special experience, be it a honeymoon, an anniversary or a 50th birthday party.

I decided to tally the top moments, the experiences as social scientists would say, that resulted from my one-night stay in Le Dôme — not comforts or bragging rights but joys; ripples of happiness.

They include: Looking across the street to see French friends huddling on their balcony, wine glasses in hand, laughing and talking as the sun began to disappear; seeing the Eiffel Tower twinkle in the dark as I wore a bathing suit, still damp from the Jacuzzi; truffles from Angelina at turn down; the glow of the Dôme des Invalides as the sun fought through rainclouds; and the ability, now and forever, to remember the time when I was lucky enough to spend a night in a magical aerie in Paris.

Hotel Room? More Like a Palace

If you’re the sort of traveler who desires a private pool, a grand piano or seating for 24 in your hotel room, look no further than today’s outrageously outfitted suites — with price tags to match. The prices below are starting rates per day and may change according to season or special events. In some cases, prices will fluctuate depending on currency rates.



TODD EBERLE

FROM
\$75,000

The Mark Penthouse, the Mark Hotel, New York

You can entertain like you're Gatsby in this five-bedroom penthouse where the living room, with 26-foot-high ceilings, a fireplace and wet bar can be transformed into a ballroom with a grand piano. Designed by Jacques Grange and introduced last year, the more than 12,000-square-foot retreat is spread out over two floors and is billed as the largest hotel penthouse suite in the country. There are six bathrooms (one with a steam room), two powder rooms, two wet bars, four fireplaces, a kitchen, a conservatory, a library lounge, a formal dining room with seating for 24 and a rooftop terrace from which you can see Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Who needs East Egg? Themarkhotel.com



FROM

\$22,600

The Katara Suite, Excelsior Hotel Gallia, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Milan

Winner of the World's Leading Hotel Suite category at the World Travel Awards last year, this gold and cream-colored fantasy offers nearly 10,800 square feet. Spa-lovers will be delighted. There are two terraces, including one with a solarium connected to a private spa with a Turkish bath and a Jacuzzi. And along with four bedrooms there's a kitchenette with Limoges porcelain and French crystal. Wish to be discreet? A "diplomatic entrance" leads directly into the suite. And if you need to mix a little business with pleasure, the suite includes a private meeting room on the eighth floor. Excelsiorhoteltalia.com



STARWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS

FROM

\$20,500

The Imperial Suite, St. Regis Dubai, United Arab Emirates

If you were hoping to host a dinner for 12 in your hotel room, this three-bedroom, nearly 10,000-square-foot suite will do the trick. After dessert, everyone can move from the dining room table and take a dip in the rooftop plunge pool. The suite is part of Dubai's Al Habtoor City, which includes three hotels, three residential towers and what is described as a "Las Vegas-style" theater. But why bother leaving the suite? There's a living room, a study, walk-in dressing areas and a lounge area. And should you require anything — bags unpacked, tour reservations, forgotten toiletries — you need only ask the butler. Stregisdubai.com



THE RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL COMPANY, L.L.C.

FROM

\$15,000

Grand Cayman Penthouse, the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands

With ocean and beach views, a wraparound terrace, fire pit, outdoor shower, dining table and a private beach cabana, this penthouse is ideal for those who want to spend most of their time outside. It's one of the largest in the Caribbean, with 8,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space, three bedrooms with flat-screen televisions (there are televisions in the bathroom mirrors, too), a cinema room with projector screen, a library, living room, wet bar, butler room, service kitchen, Bose sound system, dedicated concierge and private elevator. Ritzcarlton.com



FROM

\$11,200

The Kohinoor Suite, the Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur, India

It's such a drag when the hotel pool is crowded, isn't it? There's no need to reserve a lounge chair if you book this suite. It comes with its own 70-foot outdoor pool framed by frangipani trees. For sun worshippers there are loungers and sofas and views of Lake Pichola. Inside, amid mirror mosaics and marble privacy screens, there's a dining room, living room, two bedrooms, powder room, as well as three televisions, and, of course, 24-hour butler service. It may be hard to go wrong in any room at Oberoi Udaivilas, though: It took first place in Travel & Leisure's World's Best Hotels awards last year, and has a top rating from TripAdvisor users. Oberoihotels.com



ANDY HASLAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

FROM

\$8,938

The Kipling Suite, Brown's Hotel, London

Named for Rudyard Kipling, who is said to have written "The Jungle Book" in the hotel, this suite will warm the hearts of bookworms. There's a sitting room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a hardwood floor. You can choose a personalized experience, such as a tour of Peter Harrington Rare Books on Dover Street, to go with your stay, or, say, the Bloody Mary master class. This nearly 970-square-foot suite comes with a one-way airport transfer, two half-hour treatments in the Spa, a bottle of Ruinart Champagne, breakfast, as well as the unpacking and packing of your luggage. Roccofortelhotels.com /hotels-and-resorts/browns-hotel



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