



The lobby bar at Fashion 26.

A room at Eventi.

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A new breed of hotels (call them budget boutiques) is trying to stand out from the masses with designer details and memorable perks for around \$250 a night. A look at six.

BY STEPHEN HEYMAN



THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Trip Home to Monrovia Reawakens The Taste Buds

BY HELENE COOPER S

FINDING a decent place to sleep in New York City has never been easy. Traditionally, you either had to spend a ton of money (the Ty Warner Penthouse at the Four Seasons for \$85,000 a night, anyone?) or scrimp and hope for the best (warning: a recent search for "bed bugs" on TripAdvisor found 877 mentions for city hotels).

What's a budget- and style-conscious traveler to do? Go for the new middle. In a city that still boasts one of the nation's highest room rates (\$238 on average in Manhattan, according to Smith Travel, which tracks the industry), hotels aiming for the middle are reaching new heights.

The trend began about three years ago, with a trickle of boutique places like the Pod, the Ace and the Jane — which offered a patina of style without the premium prices. It has accelerated in recent months, with a raft of new hotels promising cool design, nods to local flavor and walkable rates of about \$200 to \$250. Call them budget boutiques. But instead of coming from daring young hoteliers, many are being rolled out by chains like InterContinental and Wyndham in a bid to attract a hipper clientele.

"It's here's a huge wave of consumer demand, especially with the younger Gen Y or millennials, for properties that have some level of style to them," said Sean Hennessey, founder of Lodging Advisors, a hospitality consultant firm.

In May, I slept in six of these new hotels. Despite their novelty, some were already victims of their own clichés. Rooftop bars, rainfall showers and iPhone docks were everywhere. Still, rooms were large by the city's pint-size standards, service was sharp, and for the moment, they offer some of the best values around.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES

Beaches and Boats, But Few Foreigners in Lerici on Italy's Riviera

BY INGRID K. WILLIAMS S

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Affordable Boutique Hotels in New York

Heavy on design and lower on cost, a new breed of hotel hits the city.

Stephen Heyman takes six rooms for a test drive.

Distrikt Hotel

WHY BOOK? On an exhausted block next to the Port Authority bus station, three new cookie-cutter hotels are stacked together like cereal boxes in a configuration that hotel bloggers have started calling a "triple pack." Distrikt, next door, is different: it has a simulacrum of soul. This is impressive, not only because of its unseemly location — within shouting distance of a homeless shelter and a parole office — but also a kitschy design conceit: every floor takes its cue from a New York City neighborhood.

ROOM My standard room was on the 28th floor; Central Park. Don't expect a wax statue of Frederick Law Olmsted. The only nods to the famous park were photo collages that hung in the room and hallway. Needless to say, the actual park wasn't visible from the window, though tan talking glimpses of the Hudson River were. The room itself was a beige rectangle furnished with the type of anachronistic contemporary furniture one might find in a West Elm catalog. The glass shower was spacious, and the matted gray carpeting was fun to dig your toes into — like newly mowed grass.

Eventi

WHY BOOK? Straddling the higher end is the Eventi, a 232-room hotel that opened last month in nothern Chelsea. Operated by Kimpton — a San Francisco-based chain that helped pioneer the budget boutique niche — it offers doses of luxury that are unusual at this price range. There's clever design, 24-hour room service, a large terrace, a sunny gym, a spa that offers so-called "spa rituals" a la carte, and even dog and cat massages.

ROOM The standard queen was sleek and handsome, with custom-made furnishings (dark woods, cloud-gray upholstery, heavy drapes) that fit right in. It had a large side table, a large mirror faced the bed, Frette linens were trimmed with zebra prints, the honor bar was stocked with an Intimacy Kit (\$8). Other high-end perks awaited the marble-tiled bathroom. There was an elongated tub, a magnifying makeup mirror and bottles of musk-scented Italian hair products.

VIBE It's a work in progress. Planned for October are a Basque mes-

VIBE Blame the stretchy neighbors, but parts of the hotel feel as though they're under lockdown. Key cards are needed to operate the elevators, and the marble-and-steel lobby is a tad cool, despite a 12-foot vertical garden. An adjacent lounge, called Colosseum, looks like a modern airport bistro. It serves breakfast by day (a routine of spread-out pastries), and drinks and bar food by night. On a recent Friday evening, it was empty. "This is New York City," said the young bartender. "Who wants to stay inside their hotel?"

MINTS An organic fudge brownie awaits you in the room, along with a personalized welcome letter — nice touches for a hotel of this class. There's no fitness center, but free passes are available to the nearby Mid City Gym. You can check your e-mail on one of three large Mac screens in the lobby, but be prepared to wait.

342 West 40th Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues; (888) 884-6610; distriktotel.com; free Wi-Fi; breakfast for \$14.95; 156 rooms from \$219.



The Strand on 37th Street.



Class Bar at Indigo.



The Distrikt lobby.



The gym at Eventi.



Fashion 26

WHY BOOK? A quick step from the Fashion Institute of Technology, this shiny new hotel by Wyndham tries hard to live up to its name. The men's a Best Dressed Guest contest had occasionally (winners get more upgrades), the Mondrian-like mural above the front desk is made from thread spools, and the concierge keeps tabs on sample sales. No, you won't see a gaggle of models during check-in, but the hotel does have fun playing dress-up.

ROOM A standard room was maybe as big as medium with plenty of nods to fashion: buttons on the door numbers, a terracotta herringbone throw on the bed and mint-green polka dots on the walls. Housekeeping staff members wear custom dresses that hit, a la mode, at French maid. A big window offered postcard views of the Empire State Building, as well as peeks inside garment showrooms across the street.

VIBE Despite all the sartorial trappings, guests dressed like any in your typical off-the-rack hotel. On a recent

Monday, there were FIT parents in the slate-gray lobby, and suits trading airport stories in the elevator. There's a chatty cocktail scene at the lobby bar, but Rare, the fiery lounge dining room, was desolate. Maybe the honeymoon — part burger joint, part formal steakhouse — was to blame. A rooftop bar is expected to open this month.

MINTS No singles here. The minibar was stocked with goodies like blueberry acid Gummy Pandas (\$9), Late July organic crackers (\$8), and Alba Botanica shave cream (\$8). There's even a 375-milliliter bottle of Absolut vodka, big enough for an intimate party. Service was polished. A free toothbrush and hair straightener were delivered in under five minutes.

851 Avenue of the Americas, between 29th and 30th Streets; (212) 564-4567; eventihotel.com; Wi-Fi: \$10 per day (free for Kimpton rewards members); a breakfast buffet is \$22; 252 rooms starting at \$289 (at \$399 once introductory rates finish in fall).

MINTS Service was elegant and unobtrusive. Arriving two hours before check-in was no problem; the attendant had a room ready. Come back for dinner and the bed is turned down. The pillows stacked upright, the comforter is moved, a note left on the sheets with tomorrow's weather, and a treat. There's also a decent gym on the base level and a single-cup Keurig coffee machine in the room.

152 West 26th Street, between Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenues; (212) 858-5888; f26ny.com; free Wi-Fi and a \$15 cocktail and \$19.70 hot-breakfast buffet, along with a la carte; 280 rooms from \$229.



A room at Distrikt.



The lobby at Fashion 26.

PHOTOGRAPHER: TONY GENTILELLI/THE NEW YORK TIMES



A suite at MAVE.



A concierge at Fashion 26.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

Hotel Indigo

WHY BOOK? Hotel Indigo may be the prototype of the new hotel class. Started by the InterContinental Hotels Group, which owns Holiday Inn and other chains, the Indigo brand aims to be affordable yet stylish, though its first property in New York City doesn't quite hit the mark. It opened last October in the heart of the downtown district, so it is hemmed on all sides with old and posh walk-ups. There are towers inside the hotel, too, though mostly of the printed variety. Halfway carpets with concealingly giant indigo and carrot-orange walls conspire to create a visual jangle. Too bad the focal theme didn't extend to the scent. The lobby smelled more like cleaning fluid than roses.

ROOM The oversaturated color scheme continued inside the room, with a headboard stretched together from swatches of reds, oranges and yellows. Still, the room was bright and airy, with hardwood floors, a small desk and a floor-to-ceiling print of sewing needles. The view was quintessentially New York: fire escapes and the back-to-back factory buildings.

As in many of these budget boutiques, the bath room was sleekly appointed. In this case, however, the shower lacked water pressure, and a puddle from the previous night was still on the shower floor in the morning.

VIBE An odd ball mix. Foreign tourists in 17 New York T-shirts sat in the lobby. Office workers crowded the smoky rooftop glass bar. And at Blu, its street-level Italian restaurant, the mix was, well, no one. The soapy risotto I was served one night may have something to do with it.

MINUTE Service was unexpectedly attentive: the front desk called shortly after check-in to make sure everything was in order. In the basement, the fitness basics business center (two desktop computers) and a well-equipped, if petite, fitness studio with free weights and treadmills.

127 West 28th Street, between Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue; (212) 973-9000; indigo.hotel.com; 127 rooms from \$129; \$15.99 breakfast buffet, and à la carte brunch served on weekends.

The MAVE

WHY BOOK? The MAVE looks great on the outside. Opened last July, it is housed in a beautiful, restored prepped building from 1902, with a short white lobby that looks like a 1920s-style boutique off the Boulevard St.-Germain. The spirit of standard white linens is approvingly over the neighborhood's magnificence in limestone buildings. And Madison Square Park, a block away, is a serene place to take your coffee and Danish (provided free) in the morning.

ROOM I snagged a \$159 rate for what the MAVE charitably calls an "urban" room. At 166 square feet, it conveyed that special feeling of living in New York City: claustrophobic. There was a modern bath room, a flat-screen television and an iPhone docking station, but no roomlet to a desk or even a chair. (You have to book a larger room for those perks.) The window air conditioner obscured an already narrow view of 27th Street. An in-room massage (\$100 an hour) sounded nice, but a massage table

couldn't possibly fit.

VIBE The MAVE is a contraction of "Madison Avenue" plus itself as "a relaxed urban retreat," but Manhattan might be more accurate. There's a barista's feel in the hallway, with an open staircase covered in that heavy-duty metal you sometimes see on truck beds. On a recent Sunday night, the hotel lobby felt empty, even so, which may have been why the few guests milling around — middle-aged Europeans in well-worn Purmas — felt compelled to whisper.

MINUTE Sneaked into a top-floor garden is a hilariously tiny fitness center. Room service is supplied by the nearby Park Avenue Bistro, with a \$8.50 surcharge for each plate, plus a 25 percent gratuity. But with such spartan rooms, and no in-room common spaces to speak of, the MAVE doesn't lend itself to dining in.

62 Madison Avenue, at 27th Street; (212) 552-7878; themavehotel.com; free Wi-Fi and basic breakfast; 72 rooms from \$159.

The Strand

WHY BOOK? Or maybe a better question is: Why is there ice in the lobby men's room urinals? Whatever the reason, it's among the cozier flourishes — so meandering, so me not so much — that lend the Strand, which opened last October on an anonymous block on East 37th Street, its accidental charm. Another bonus: the rooftop bar, which offers King Kong views of the Empire State Building, was recently featured in New York magazine's "Best of New York" issue, alerting the natives.

ROOM My \$260 queen room on the 10th floor, felt brand new and not necessarily in a good way: dinky lampshades and chairs swathed in bold, contrasting prints. Still, the room was cozy, and the view of water towers and prewar back buildings felt distinctively Gotham. Fashion blow-ups from vintage issues of Vogue gave the walls some pop. In the second-floor restaurant opens, as early as next month, the me's no room service. The bath room was airy but staid, with beige marble and a large mirror,

though only half of the spacious shower stall was walled in glass, which made for a chilly walk-up.

VIBE The lobby, with its white limestone floor, brushed metal and vaguely Art Deco furniture, felt like old, too. The wide warm rattan rooftop bar, top of the Strand, thanks partly to a retractable roof that keeps the party rolling in, had the air. The Hampton's gave looks by Lydia Matsis, who did the sets for the "Sex and the City" movies.

MINUTE The Strand doesn't skip on its free breakfast: piles of cold cuts, cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, fruit, rolls stuffed with meat. It was surprisingly tasty. There's a 24-hour gym that seems to be underused. Service was casual, even chatty, including a bellhop who over-shared.

33 West 36 Street, between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas; (212) 448-1024; thestrandnyc.com; free Wi-Fi and breakfast buffet; 177 rooms from \$239 (until June 30) and \$289 (from July 1 to Sept. 6).



A bathroom at Eventi.

ONLINE INTERACTIVE MAP
Take a look inside six highly designed midprice hotels in Manhattan.
nytimes.com/travel