



USA WEEKEND

Inns are **IN**

Hotels aren't just for weary travelers anymore. These days, locals are lounging at the lodge, drawn in by the lure of hip sites and fun nights.

BY LAURA BOSWELL

IT'S EARLY Friday night, and already a small crowd of crisp young professionals, ruffled businessmen, and fishnetted and leathered clubgoers have filled the Topaz Hotel's cozy yet cosmopolitan bar. They chat and sip glittering drinks from frosted, chunky martini glasses. Lights subtly thrum colors overhead, and music plays, varying from funk to techno — as different as the patrons themselves.

Not a single one is a hotel guest.

But at Topaz, a Washington, D.C., “boutique” hotel owned by the San Francisco-based Kimpton Group, the staff isn't bothered. “We're thrilled our neighbors come here to hang out. We had to hire extra bar staff,” says sales manager Rick Legel. “The locals provide great word-of-mouth. They'll tell their friends and family.”

Boutique hotels typically have under 200 rooms and target trendy Gen-X business travelers with modern furnishings and distinctive amenities. But a waning economy in 2001, followed by a dismal autumn, spurred boutiques' outreach to potential customers — not in other cities, but on their own sidewalks.

Mainstream hotels long have known the value of reaching out to their neighbors. The Kingsport, Tenn., Ramada Inn becomes a local “who's who” every Sunday with its traditional Southern buffet brunch. The oceanfront Days Inn at Virginia Beach, Va., boasts a four-star restaurant, Timbaktu, which offers week-day meal specials for locals only, as well as saxophone music on Thursday nights. And Charleston, S.C.'s Howard Johnson Riverfront works with hospitals and the Ronald McDonald House to give a \$37 rate to special neighbors — people with relatives in the hospital — even on weekends when the regular rate is \$129.

While standard hotels rely on family-style hospitality, the “public spaces” — lobbies, bars, clubs and restaurants — are the key to boutique hotels' neighborhood success. Instead of wood paneling and steam tables, there are funky living rooms and eateries with

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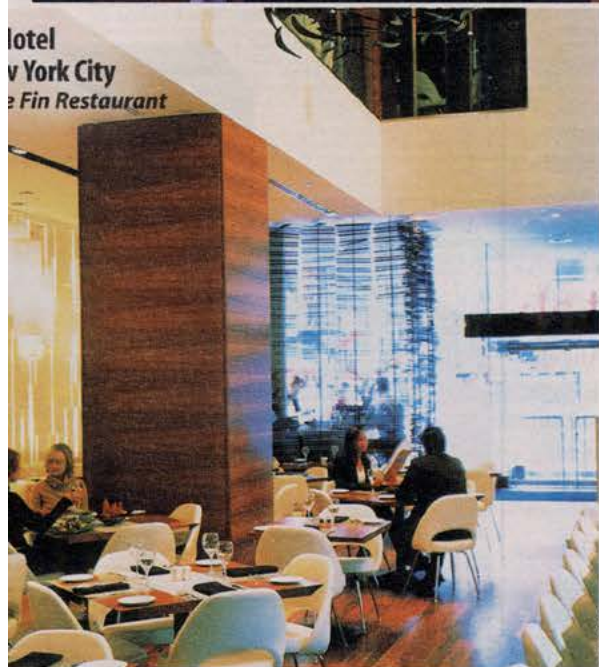
Lifestyles



Topaz Hotel
Washington, D.C.
Topaz Bar

DAVID PHELPS

Hotel
New York City
Fin Restaurant



STARWOOD

Boutique hotels attract locals as well as trendy Gen-X business travelers with modern furnishings, chic restaurants and distinctive amenities.

of the box," says general manager Nick Gregory.

"It's about time they opened a place like this," says Jeff Rogers, a 30-something producer at National Public Radio. "It's hip but without the attitude — a lot of fun." Rogers is not a guest, but a couple at another table is celebrating an anniversary by staying there for the weekend. All three are D.C. residents.

Boutiques hope that once in the door, locals will take advantage of specials befitting their lifestyles.

In San Francisco, where parking spots are as common as successful dot-coms, Hotel Triton offers a "Drive-Thru" package with free valet parking and car deodorant. In New York, the Roger Williams includes in its "Urban Serenity" package aromatherapy candles and yoga classes. This summer, Hotel Rouge is attracting local business with its "Get Out of Your Apartment" rate for neighbors crowded with house-guests. With specials, locals can sample boutiques' hyper-detailed services and amenities, including digital office space, complimentary shoe shines, Aveda bath products and top-of-the-line gyms and spa services. Pets are almost always allowed, and they, too, are given top-dog treatment.

The downtown San Francisco Ramada Plaza uses not just a drink, but an entire franchise, to nab traffic. The hotel leased space to Starbucks as part of a "pilot program." It has grossed more than \$1 million so far, despite being one of Starbucks' smallest locations.

Locals visit neighborhood hotels for their unique personalities, services and fun. But if the fun leads to an overnight stay, so much the better for everyone, neighbor or not. **W**

top chefs. The minimalist mesh of "hip meets homey" keeps the locals lounging in.

"My goal with W was to make the hotel a meeting place again, for guests and for surrounding businesses," says Barry Sternlicht, head of Starwood Hotels & Resorts. W, Starwood's boutique brand, has 16 properties nationwide. "A great restaurant and cool bar where you can see and be seen. ... The new W New York Times Square is already a favorite of our neighbors Morgan Stanley, MTV and Lehman Brothers to entertain or just unwind after work."

Hotel Rouge, another Kimpton property in Washington, attracts clientele with its emphasis on sin, glam and lots of red. Everywhere there aren't Venus de Milo statues, velvet ottomans or white Muppet-fur rugs, there's red. "For conservative D.C., it's definitely breaking out

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