

BUNKING DOWN

Is the new breed of upmarket hostels a viable option for budget business travellers? **Rose Dykins** reports

Your backpacking days are firmly in the past. The thought of sharing a room with 11 strangers, or slipping on some flip-flops and schlepping to a communal bathroom – well, you wouldn't dream of it. And if somebody suggested that you checked into a hostel for your next business trip rather than your preferred hotel brand, you would probably think they were insane.

But on the budget side of business travel, interesting changes are taking place in Europe. People are increasingly turning to hostels for business stays – but not the kind of hostels you will remember.

Forget prison-style bunk beds and mouldy shower curtains – hostels have gone upmarket. Private rooms with modern en suite bathrooms, ubiquitous free wifi and attractive public areas can be found in this new generation of hostels, and for those on a tight budget, they could be worth considering over a three-star hotel.

Carl Michel, executive chairman of Generator hostels, says the uptake from business travellers has been gradually rising. "This is a growing trend. I'm on the board of Stay Wyse [staywyse.org, a nonprofit organisation that supports hostels around the world] and we're seeing that about 10 per cent of our guests are business travellers, and that's been growing at a rate of about 1 per cent per annum for the past five years." Generator can even be found on corporate booking systems now.

Alvaro Hinojosa, chief executive of U Hostels in Madrid, says: "Business travel occupancy is about 20 per cent but during [trade fair] FITUR, 40 per cent of guests are visiting the event."

It's important to note the term "business traveller" is a loose one. "Our product is not intended for chairmen and chief executives, but for middle or junior managers travelling on a budget," Michel says. "Millennials [people born in the 1980s] will dip in and out of brands and vary their tastes. One moment they might stay at a posh resort and another fly with a budget carrier. What's more, they don't see those differing behaviours as inconsistent."

To say that luxury hostels are better value for money than budget hotels doesn't necessarily mean they are much cheaper. From an internet search conducted in early February, a midweek stay in a Double room at Generator Hamburg in April started from €76 (£62), while a night at the Ibis Hamburg Alster Centrum, a

ten-minute walk away, started from £66. A Deluxe en suite single room at U Hostels Madrid was €60, compared with €56 at the Holiday Inn Madrid. When we checked again a week later, the hostels were around £20-£40 cheaper than their budget hotel counterparts.

Rather than the price, it's the experience these properties offer that might tempt curious business travellers looking for more than a bed for the night. Kash Bhattacharya, a 34-year-old travel blogger (budgettraveller.org) and author of free e-book *Luxury Hostels of Europe*, says: "When I'm travelling for business, I want to stay somewhere that

Below: Generator Copenhagen



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TRIED & TESTED LUXURY HOSTELS

Generator London

A short walk from Euston station on Tavistock Place, Generator London (pictured left) is housed in a former police station and has 868 beds, with 22 en suite twin rooms. I arrived in the evening to find the public areas buzzing with activity. The vast ground floor is divided into several sections, with graffiti walls, pictures of London and a red bus installation emerging from the bar giving a sense of locale. It's an inviting area, with stylish furniture arranged so you can choose to sit alone or join others. People were typing away at their Apple Macs in a separate room. The atmosphere was friendly, and the clientele distinctly international – mostly young people that were travelling, but I also noticed several more mature guests relaxing with a beer. A decent burger and chips in the restaurant cost £6.

Unfortunately, I couldn't connect to the wifi in my room. Another problem was the soundproofing – while the live DJ set in the bar was great when I was downstairs, it continued until about 2am, and the persistent bass line made for a disrupted night's sleep. On the plus side, the mattress was very comfortable. There was a workdesk with a lamp and plug sockets, a clothes rail with plastic hangers, and a shelf. The rainshower in the clean en suite wetroom took about five minutes to heat up but the pressure was good. Soap and a towel was provided, and there was a hairdryer in the public bathroom on my floor. A basic continental breakfast was included.

■ Single en suite rooms from £95 midweek. 37 Tavistock Place; tel +44 (0)20 7388 7666; generatorhostels.com

Safestay London

Formerly a Labour party HQ, Safestay London (pictured left and below) is a ten-minute walk from Elephant and Castle Underground station, on the Bakerloo line. The location may feel a little rough and ready for first-time Londoners, but the City can be reached in 20 minutes. Open since 2012, Safestay has the bright, smart feel of a budget hotel rather than a hostel. The public area, with its chartreuse and magenta colour scheme, stylish armchairs and leather sofas, has a similarly corporate feel, and was a calm, peaceful space when I visited in the evening – quiet enough for me to stream an episode of *Homeland*. It's a shame there is no in-room wifi, nor a workdesk, but the free wireless internet in the public area was fast, and there were lots of plug sockets and assorted tables for working.

There are 407 beds in 74 rooms, including 11 Private en suite options. My Private room was spacious, with a bunk (the bottom bed was a double) and a wetroom – the shower worked well. I found the mattress a little hard, but I slept soundly, as the hostel was very quiet, with only occasional noise from the corridor. There was a large Toshiba flatscreen TV with a range of channels, towels, a luggage rack, tea and coffee-making facilities, soap and coat hangers (though no wardrobe space). A hairdryer can be rented from the 24-hour reception (£10 deposit), and the free breakfast comprises croissants and cereal.

■ Private en suite rooms from £90 per night midweek. 144-152 Walworth Road; tel +44 (0)20 7703 8000; safestay.co.uk



I can walk into and have a chat and a glass of wine – I’m not someone who goes straight to my room. That social edge is the thing you get with these hostels. But at the end of the night, you have your own private space.”

Such properties also offer group activities, and the chance to soak up the city’s culture. Hinojosa lists free walking tours, film screenings, flamenco shows and games nights as examples of what U Hostels offers.

At the same time, the term “luxury” should not be over-exaggerated when it’s applied to a hostel, as it still remains a no-frills option. “The luxury hostel experience is very much the same as that which the low-cost airlines gave us ten or 15 years ago,” Michel says. “Look what happened with Easyjet – it started as a leisure carrier, then realised that because it was so punctual and its service so good, it would attract business travellers.

“Similarly, we have got an exciting product that’s well-priced, and would appeal to anyone. It’s about offering the things that matter to people – wifi, privacy, a good bed and a long-running food and beverage offering.”

This month, Generator will extend the Premium service available in its Barcelona hotel section to the Twin rooms in its hostel, as well as to its Berlin, Copenhagen, Dublin and Hamburg properties. Extra amenities (for €15) will include toiletries, food and drink vouchers, fast check-in, late check-out, and free in-room drinks and snacks. Michel says: “We are eventually going to offer a premium wifi product too, [although] it hasn’t been priced yet.”

So what about privacy? Is there a secure place to keep your valuables? “In terms of privacy, [a Single or Twin room] is the same as staying in a budget hotel,” Michel says. “All of our hostels have two types of safes – a large in-room one for luggage with card access and smaller boxes by the lobby for phones and laptops. The whole property operates on a card entry system.”

And what about the other clientele? Bhattacharya says: “Even among the luxury hostels, there will be some with a bit more of a party atmosphere, which might not be ideal for the business traveller. I always encourage people to tweet me for recommendations (@BudgetTraveller). It’s still a new trend, and it’s going to take time. I think the UK is slightly lagging behind [the rest of Europe] but it has massive potential.”

Hinojosa recently visited London to source a new U Hostels location, while Generator is opening in Paris at the end

of the year, and Rome the next. Michel says he is “looking aggressively at North America, particularly New York,” adding that Madrid and Amsterdam also have potential.

Still not sure whether you’d fit in? “When business people stay at U Hostels, I have seen them go to their room, put on some jeans and be like any other guest,” Hinojosa says. Bhattacharya adds: “People have this fear that they might stand out and be surrounded by a bunch of 20-somethings getting wasted. The reality is different – the 30 and 40-year-olds have a drink with them.

“These are happy places. Being somewhere that we can meet interesting, friendly people and learn something new can make a big difference to our well-being, given the amount of time we spend on the road alone.” Just don’t book the dorm. ■

Below: Plus Berlin



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LUXURY HOSTELS IN EUROPE

The Independente, Lisbon

Located near the historic Bairro Alto district, the Independente (pictured left) is within walking distance of Rossio station. There are 11 dormitories and four “suites”, which are private king rooms with en suite bathrooms and balconies overlooking the Tagus River. The hostel’s trendy restaurant/bar, the Decadente, serves contemporary Portuguese cuisine and has a private terrace. The chic interiors sport antique furniture and distressed wood.

■ Suites from €100; theindependente.pt

Plus Berlin

The newest addition to the Plus Hostel group, which has locations in Berlin, Prague and Italy, is two blocks from Warschauer Strasse station in the German city’s Friedrichshain district, and one block from the River Spree. The property has a separate section with private hotel rooms, but all guests have access to free wifi and use of an indoor pool and a sauna. Double rooms have en suite bathrooms, flatscreen TVs and desks, and there is a 242 sqm conference room and a restaurant.

■ Double rooms from €56; plushostels.com

Kex Hostel, Reykjavik

Opened in 2010, Kex (pictured centre) resides in a converted biscuit factory, a short walk from the main street of Laugavegur, and has panoramic sea views. As well as dorms, there are three hotel-style rooms with private bathrooms. Kex also offers free wifi, laundry facilities, a cinema, a meeting room, a gym, a barbershop and a lively, open-plan restaurant and bar serving tasty Icelandic food and Viking beer.

Business Traveller’s Jenny Southan had a tour and says: “Its industrial interiors have been given a homely feel with vintage furniture, stacks of old *National Geographic* magazines, books, maps and curios. I was told by the manager that, as well as backpackers, Kex has become popular with actors, photographers, musicians and even politicians visiting the city.”

■ Double Plus rooms from 21,500 Kr (£113); kexhostel.is

The Beehive, Rome

Not far from Termini station, this colourful hotel-hostel hybrid (pictured left) offers simple “Sweets” with personal bathrooms. There is free wifi, and most private rooms have a small desk. The lounge, communal seating area – adorned with artwork – and private garden offer space for working or relaxing. The owners run a vegetarian café in the same building, and host vegan buffets three evenings a week.

■ Sweet rooms from €100; the-beehive.com

Jessica Thomas

