

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

‘Meet Me at My Club...in Tulum’

Home to whiskey-themed networking events and dance-floor deals, a new crop of hotels caters to professionals

By JAY CHESHES

One recent evening, guests at the new Curtain hotel in East London were treated to a surprise concert from Chance the Rapper in the hotel's private members club, which it touts as a “home for creative entrepreneurs.” The club features a co-working space, screening room and roof bar, access to all of which comes gratis with a room reservation. Meanwhile, a similar professionally minded club at the new Eaton Workshop hotel, which opened this summer in Hong Kong, services “an inclusive tribe of changemakers and creatives,” according to its recruiting materials, with its own 50-seat theater, recording studio and wellness center on site. A second Eaton property opens in Washington, D.C. this fall.

While big chain hotels often have club floors where their most loyal guests might get free drinks and a steam-table buffet, these new iterations offer insider access, eating and drinking venues and networking opportunities of a much higher caliber. The big advantage? They're places you might actually want to hang out in. Club programming, like screenings, concerts, lectures and mixers, is often included too.

“One of the ways you separate yourself in a crowded market is creating a sense of exclusivity and privilege,” said the Curtain's founder, Michael Achenbaum, head of New York's Gansevoort Hotel Group. “The private club is our way of presenting that.”

For travelers, the clubs deliver a built-in social scene, whether you're in search of a co-working desk to park your computer or a hot bar after work. The Curtain, with its focus on nightlife, might draw one type of guest, while Eaton House, which is hosting a women's conference in Hong Kong

These new hotel private clubs reflect the mixed-up way we work and play. Our personal time and our jobs are merging.

this fall, may draw another.

Though the clientele differ, the source of inspiration is always the same. Call it the Soho House effect. The pioneer in uber-hip private clubs launched its first venue in London's theater district in 1995, with a membership focused on the entertainment industry. In the 23 years since, founder Nick Jones has built Soho House into a sprawling, multifaceted lifestyle brand with its own restaurants, spas, and co-working spaces in 22 clubs around the world, with all-access membership fees now running \$3,200 a year. Many of those “houses” also have hotel rooms inside. Though members get better prices (generally 20% off regular rates) and priority access, the rooms are open to anyone—with club entry included as a tantalizing perk.

While Soho House remains a private club company with a hotel



component, the new hotel players have flipped the script. There's no easy formula, however, for building a genuine sense of community, with or without a private club. Hotels like the Ace in New York, which has turned its lobby into a full-time party and public workspace, inspire plenty of knockoffs, not all successful.

“A lot of traditional hotels try to build a social hub and, I won't name names, but two nights ago I stayed in one, a new brand, and the social hub was deadsville and it was a Saturday night,” said Tony Kurz, CEO of Karl Lagerfeld Hospitality Group, who is developing a new hotel group with a private club component in a licensing deal with fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld. The first of these Karl Lagerfeld hotels, launching in Macau next year, won't have a club, but subsequent properties across east Asia and the Middle East certainly will (the next locations have not been announced).

The public spaces of the Sunset Tower in West Hollywood have the sort of buzzy, networking-friendly social scene Mr. Kurz is pursuing. Its celebrity-packed Tower Bar operates, essentially, like a private club (good luck getting a table if you don't have an in with the gatekeeper maitre'd). For owner Jeff Klein, launching an entirely private hotel seemed like a next logical step. His San Vicente Bungalows, opening this fall in a former fleabag motel near the Sunset Tower, will have nine hotel rooms accessible only to members and their guests. Reconfigured by British designer Rita Kong, the palm-shrouded property will also consist of a restaurant,

PERK UP From top: The drinking den at the Curtain, a hotel and private club in London; the view from a room at Habitas Tulum, Mexico.

bar and a garden pool surrounded by lounge spaces, all well suited for confidential deal-making. A public-facing sister property, \$50, will open across the street. But a room in the one won't gain you access to the other. “If I were a club member paying a couple of thousand a year I would be annoyed that anybody could get access by just going online and booking a room,” said Mr. Klein.

The growing appeal of private clubs—Soho House has been expanding at the rate of two new outposts a year—reflects the increasingly mixed-up way we work and play. “There has been a movement away from the traditional, nine-to-five way of life,” said Soho House's Mr. Jones, “and people instead want more flexibility as work and personal time merge. They also want space to meet and exchange ideas.” Katherine Lo, the young hotelier behind Eaton Workshop who plans to launch the brand in Seattle and San Francisco in the next couple of years, is driven by a similar philosophy: “People are getting more hybrid not only in our careers, but in how we live and travel.”

A business meeting is as likely to take place on a chaise by the pool as in a corporate boardroom these days. A startup may be born on the dance floor or in a dusty tent at Burning Man, which is where Habitas, another new club-hotel mashup, first started to gestate.

The company's three founders, who met at the annual music and art gathering in Nevada, launched their first hotel, a beach-front property in Tulum, last year. Urban clubhouses—with work spaces, gyms and kitchens, but no guest rooms—followed shortly thereafter in New York and Venice Beach, Calif. Though you don't have to be a member to book a room, their rapidly expanding hospitality group focuses on encouraging social interaction among all of its guests.

“At most hotels, the experience is very similar,” said CEO Oliver Ripley. “You check in, get your key, go to your room, go downstairs for breakfast, choose a table by yourself, go down to the beach, choose a sun bed by yourself. Meanwhile the whole world has been moving toward shared living, shared working. Why has the hotel experience not evolved?”

The New Clubhouse Hotels
THE CURTAIN / LONDON
This 120-room hotel, which opened



last year in the Shoreditch section of East London, features a pool on the roof and nightclub in the basement, along with an outpost of chef Marcus Samuelsson's Harlem restaurant Red Rooster. Hotel guests have access to most of the spaces in its 1,700-member club, which hosts whiskey tastings, intimate concerts and new movie premieres. The Gansevoort Hotel group, which is behind the place, hopes to launch a sister club in New York eventually. *Rooms from \$250 a night, membership dues from \$1,200 a year, thecurtain.com*

HABITAS / TULUM

The founders of Habitas started calling their first hotel in Tulum a “home,” an apt enough description: Members can leave behind clothes and a toothbrush for the next time they come through. Members also get access to the Habitas clubhouses in Venice Beach, Calif. and New York, but only the Tulum branch doubles as a hotel (for now), with a castaway vibe fit for an aspiring tech mogul. Thatched huts on the beach and luxury tents in the jungle are all outfitted with air conditioning, high-speed internet access and 400-thread-count sheets. Communal meals, jungle concerts and outdoor screenings encourage mixing with fellow travelers. *Rooms from \$300 a night, membership dues \$2,200 a year, habitastulum.com*

LA GRANJA / IBIZA

A 200-year-old farmhouse in the wild heart of Ibiza has been transformed by the founder of the Design Hotels group into a luxurious members-only retreat with a techno-music soundtrack. Bookings, available only by phone, include membership for the night in the hotel's Friends of a Farmer club named for its agricultural setting (much of the food at the vegan-friendly restaurant is grown on site). Holistic activities pitched as “rituals” include yoga, meditation and slow-food cooking classes. La Granja is above all a leisure retreat, but a more business-oriented sister property is slated to open in Berlin in 2020. *From \$400 a night, lagranjabiza.com*

EATON HK / HONG KONG

Katherine Lo launched the Eaton Workshop brand as a youthful adjunct to her family's luxury Langham hotel chain, adding a private club, Eaton House, which draws entrepreneurs, artists and activists. The first, 465-room branch, which opened in her native Hong Kong this summer, features murals painted by artists-in-residence, its own radio station and a dining space filled with street-food stalls. A second outpost opens in Washington, D.C. this fall. *Rooms from \$160 a night; membership dues from \$320 a month; eatonworkshop.com*



SUN AND WEB-SURFING For a new breed of worker, Soho House Chicago functions as both a hotel open to all and a members-only club.