

**Financial Times**  
**Putting on the Glitz**

*Hoteliers are swooping into the home furnishings market, setting up online shops to sell to their guests*

By Nicole Swengley  
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Returning home from a stay at a well-designed hotel can be depressing. You never liked your sofa; the curtains look wrong and you've been meaning to buy new lamps for months. If only your place looked like the guest suite you've just vacated.

Well now it can. As homeowners increasingly seek inspiration from chic hotel interiors, hoteliers are responding by selling their luxury trappings online. The buyer finds an instant design solution, while the seller subtly extends its brand into its target market.

"We are now seeing a blurring of formerly distinct boundaries: designers have entered the hotel market and hotels are marketing lifestyle products," says Catharine Macdonald Keir of the upmarket industry bible, *Luxury Briefing*. "It's natural...for the hotels. Many of the products on offer have been ordered in quantity so if hotels can increase profit margins by selling them to guests, it works for everybody,"

Some design professionals are skeptical, of course. "The whole point about furnishing your own home is to give it your own personality, so why blindly replicated what you see elsewhere?" says residential interiors specialist Mark Humphrey. "The whole point about staying in a quality hotel is to experience a change away from home."

But that has not stopped hoteliers from rushing into the retail market. Sofitel, part of the big French group, Accor, for example, has an exclusive deal with French bed brand Epeda and bedlinen specialist Dumas. Its bed model, called MyBed, is higher than most, with an extra-thick mattress, boxspring base and down featherbed between the mattress and sheets, topped off with a comforter and oversized pillows filled with hypo-allergenic feathers. Homeowners can order it (with bedlinen) from the hotel group's online shop, as well as accessories, including a red glass vase and table lamp from Sofitel St. James in London and a Buddha hand sculpture from Sofitel Chicago.

In the US, the Ritz-Carlton has partnered with favoured suppliers who offer a “white glove” delivery service direct to guests’ homes. Selected items such as Sealy Posturpedic Plus mattresses and box spring sets, Pacific Coast Feather Company bedlinen and a four-poster pet bed complete with lion’s head finials are available for online purchase and will soon be joined by a complete home collection.

In the UK, stylish mid-market hotel group Malmaison also recently opened its online shop. “Relive the whole experience...with Mal memorabilia,” the website trills, before leading visitors to the duck-down pillows and duvets used at the company’s Belfast hotel and china espresso cups and saucers that come with or without the Malmaison logo.

Even more impressive is the online service that Nine Zero, a chic boutique hotel in Boston, launched in August. Working with design specialist, Hoteluxury, the hotelier has created a magazine-style website where you can browse through rooms and public areas, viewing the furnishings from several angles. Practically everything in the hotel is for sale and goods can be shipped worldwide.

The hotel’s look is stylish and contemporary—it’s big on chrome, nickel, stainless steel and glass—and nearly all the furnishings are custom-made. The collection includes a smart leather bench, oval maple dining table with 12-inch leaf, adjustable leather desk chair with gel seat cushion, an ebony-stained macassar lobby cocktail cabinet and a writing desk with metal X base. The choice is wide enough to furnish an entire house with framed prints, furniture, mirrors, vases, rugs, curtains, linens, cutlery, glassware and ceramic tableware. There’s a good lighting selection including floor and table lamps, sconces and picture lights. You can even buy the hotel’s taps, shower-heads and white porcelain basins.

“Our guests are affluent, tech-savvy, on-the-go global travelers,” says James Horseman, Nine Zero’s general manager. “They have sophisticated tastes and want things instantly. They don’t have time to visit design showrooms. We recently put new bar stools in the restaurant and within 24 hours we got a call from a guest asking where to buy them.”

Horseman anticipates a “tremendous revenue stream” but admits the partnership with Hoteluxury is key to the concept’s success. “What makes it work for us is that we get a percentage of sales but are not involved in the running of this venture, which is just as well since I’m a hotelier, not a retail specialist,” he says. “Guests benefit by getting custom-made designs they won’t see elsewhere and can try before they buy.”

Grace Leo-Andrieu, owner and designer of GLA group holdings (including the Cadogan in London, Cotton House in Mustique, Royal Riviera at St. Jean Cap Ferrat and Bel-Ami and Lancaster in Paris) agrees that hotels are now design

testing grounds. “It’s a way of having other people spend years doing all the research,” she says.

She recently launched the website, A Touch of Grace, featuring products designed for her hotels including Limoges porcelain from the Royal Riviera and Chinoiserie porcelain created for the Lancaster. There’s even a luxury dog bed; the contemporary-looking Philipp Plein-designed stainless steel pet platform, complete with faux-ostrich leather cushions, costs from 1,000 pounds.

Nick Jones, owner of Soho House in New York and Babington in Somerset, England, is also moving into the retail market, working with designer Isle Crawford, on a Babington Home furnishings range to be launched online in 2006. It seemed only natural given that guests were constantly asking where to buy the items—from towels to televisions—in his hotels.

“When guests stay with us they can actually feel and use the furnishings, [and] that gives them the confidence to buy,” Jones explains.

One of the first hoteliers to realize the currency of her furnishing style was Olga Polizzi, who designs for her brother Sir Rocco Forte’s hotel collection. Encouraged by the response to a sales boutique at the Hotel Tresanton in Cornwall, she is in the early stages of introducing a hotel furnishings range for online purchase via the Rocco Forte Hotels website. The red leather Lady Olga chaise lounge designed for The Lowry Hotel in Manchester and Russian porcelain tableware from Hotel Astoria in St. Petersburg are among the initial offerings.

In the meantime, guests can always ask about pieces they fancy. “The design team are not precious with their information,” says the RF Hotels. “If someone wanted to buy a lamp or match the paint colours of a guest room then they would happily provide the details.”

In fact, when one US homeowner rang The Lowry to inquire about buying some of its artwork, which she’d seen in a magazine, the concierge put her in touch with the artist Ben Cook who agreed to create a commissioned piece.

Even tiny hotels are getting into the retail game. At the eight-bedroom Liety Bedfor in Wales, for example, interior designer-owner Ann Hughes sells everything on display in the hotel via its website—from leather sofas and crystal photo-frames to cushions, ceramic tableware, door stops, oak peg rails and a vintage shoe-shine box.

More furnishings are promised as the site evolves.

Owners of period homes are catered for by Chateau de Bagnois, the restored 13<sup>th</sup> century French chateau where 400 craftsmen were employed to re-create

furnishings in an authentic 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century style, including French hand-blown glassware based on 18<sup>th</sup> century Burgundian design and Sheffield-made, pistol-handled knives copied from an 18<sup>th</sup>-century original. More than 500 items are available to buy online including Limoges porcelain, cutlery, lamps, linens, chairs, tables and garden furniture. Should you need a brass wine cooler, a bronze fountain spout, a sycamore hand-turned plate, a barber's mirror on a hand-turned wooden stand or a wrought iron garden rocking chair, this is the site to visit.

Order it and have it delivered. It's just the sort of room service we all want these days.