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Ultimate Room Service

By Jessica Michault

November 26, 2005, Paris – Born of one missing towel too many, perhaps, or the bond that grows between a good hotel and its guests, there has been an explosion in Web sites and catalogues in recent years that sell everything from hotel bedding to bathroom sinks — the experience, in short, of a luxury hotel lifestyle in the privacy of the buyer's own home.

“There is a longstanding tradition of guest wanting to take home a souvenir, knicknacks like towels or bathrobes,” says Welf Ebeling, executive vice president and chief operating officer of The Leading Hotels of the World, a group that represents more than 400 luxury hotels worldwide. “Now each of our hotels has its own unique range of luxury goods specific to its location.”

The days have gone when travel memories were captured in a steamer trunk covered with luggage tags from hotels around the world. Now guests want to buy the handmade floor tiles they found in their hotel bathroom in Italy, the tableware from room service in Hong Kong, even the bed that they slept in while vacationing in Paris.

Guests want to buy “quality items that are unique to the hotel while at the same time reflecting the guest's personal taste,” said John Sears, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Boutique Hotels and Resorts, a global alliance of independent boutique hostelrys. These gifts have the added bonus of being great conversation pieces that guests can share with their friends as they recount their latest vacation stories.

For the hotels, where a weekend stay will run into thousands of U.S. dollars, gifts like the Fabergé water carafe from the Ritz Carlton (\$150), the double sun lounger from JW Marriott Phuket Resort and Spa in Thailand (\$625), or the Cloud Nine writing desk (\$3,600) from the Nine Zero boutique hotel in Boston, are the best kind of advertisement, transmitting a powerful message of luxury in an understated way.

Guests who buy themselves such items, or give them as presents, are like a fashion-savvy woman who can spot the latest must-have handbag from a mile away. For a world traveler worth his or her first class ticket, recognizing a luxury hotel piece in a friend's home, or offering one as a gift, is another way of displaying status.

Megan Webber, corporate retail buyer for Ritz Carlton, works closely with the hotel chain's shopping Web site, www.ritzcarltonshops.com, and has seen its

sales triple since it started four years ago. The site's most popular section is signature bedding, where pillows, sheets and even mattresses are available for sale.

"At the Ritz Carlton our hotel rooms are not all matching," Webber said. "They are a bit eclectic and the use of space is well thought out and this appeals to customers who would like to reproduce this in their own home."

Web sites like those of the Starwood hotel chain's W Hotels, www.whelsthestore.com or the Hilton chain's www.hilton-hotelsathome.com are selling furniture, clothing and alarm clocks, as well as the ubiquitous hotel bedding.

But the Nine Zero hotel is the first to go a step further, offering everything in the hotel for sale through its own site www.ninezero.com, and www.hoteluxury.com, the site of a new e-commerce company, Hoteluxury at Home.

"You can buy everything from the floor under your feet to the drapes on the wall to the couch in the lobby," said Kathy Coyle, manager of customer server and vendor relations at Hoteluxury.

"The business of a hotel is to put heads on pillows, not to deal with the retail aspect of selling hotel items," Coyle said.

"That is where we come in, and run the entire e-business for them."

Hoteluxury's chief executive, Catharine Arnston, started the company just over a year ago after experiencing the frustration, on a luxury vacation with her sister, of not being able to buy a memento from her hotel that she coveted.

Hoteluxury.com aims to tap into a market of affluent customers who want designer homes, without hiring a designer.

Since luxury hotels constantly have to make over their look as they try to stay on the cutting edge of style, it makes sense, if you want a stylish and fashionable room, to order one from room service.

So now that you can buy your favorite hotel room and take it home, what is left for the hotel to offer?

The most precious luxury gifts are time and service, said Lee Sutton, Director of Public Relations for Asia and Australia for Marriott International.

The Marriott resort in Phuket has introduced a vacation planner Web site to save time spent scheduling activities; and some guests have grown so fond of the staff that they say they would really like to buy them, too, Sutton said.

“They want to hire them to take back home so they could continue the pampering service after they leave.”