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Suite dreams

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It used to be that a hotel was referred to as "luxury" because it provided elegantly decorated rooms, attentive staff, bed linens of the highest thread count, and food exquisite enough to melt the most botoxed of upper lips. But this is no longer true. The world's most luxurious hotels have upped their game. Now they grant wishes.

In New York there is a gemologist who will bring jewellery to guests' rooms, while in Florida a tanning butler patrols the pool with complementary sunscreen and a willing hand.

This dedication to service is not restricted to America. In one Mexican hotel there is a soap concierge who will discuss what you would like to lather up with, and in Bermuda there is someone paid to offer advice to nervous men who are preparing to pop the question.

How far can this attention to detail go? Will guests soon be bathed by dedicated staff?

Once a mini-bar and a chocolate on the pillow were considered the height of luxury. Today, five star hotels are going to ever greater lengths to give their guests the ultimate pampering experience. From dedicated butlers to wireless internet access by the pool, nothing, it seems, is too much trouble.

Higher levels of disposable income mean that more people than ever before can take the kind of holidays that used to be the preserve of the seriously rich.

Any attempt to compile a definitive list of the most luxurious hotels in the world has to include the Burj Al Arab in Dubai. A mere five star rating is not high enough for this monument to opulence and it considers itself worthy of seven stars, although technically no such grading exists.

The world's tallest hotel, shaped like the billowing sail of a ship, is gloriously over the top. Each gold coloured item in its 202 rooms is, in fact, made of the precious metal. This includes the television stand, several lamps and the large mirror on the ceiling. However, it's the level of service which really makes the Burj, as the locals call it, stand out.

For the duration of your stay there is a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce at your disposal. There is also a personal butler who will be at your service at any hour of the day or night. This despite the fact that most things in the room, including the lighting, curtains and air conditioning, can be operated with the touch of a button on your remote control. Rooms can cost £7,000 a night, which doesn't include the 10 per cent service charge or 10 per cent municipality tax you are required to pay; but at that point, who's counting?

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For many luxury travellers the spa break is the ultimate holiday. California is the home of pampering and the Ritz Carlton at Half Moon Bay offers the most indulgent packages.

The seven spa guest rooms are replete with candles, flowers, a "spa-bar" selection of relaxing CDs, and to complete this calming experience - or maybe overload it - perfume is even puffed into the rooms.

For some, it is no longer enough just to pamper yourself, you need to be able to treat the pet in your life.

At Las Ventanas al Paraiso Resort in Los Cabos, Mexico, pampered pooches receive a full body massage, followed by a meal of shredded beef and steamed rice before retiring to a private patio to gaze at the stars through a special canine telescope.

Perhaps these are the easy options - after all you would expect to find crazy luxury in California. For a more adventurous approach take a flight to Santa Fe, New Mexico and once there, book yourself into the Inn of the Anasazi and onto a private jet for one of its no-expense-spared trips.

The hotel has an eight-seat jet plane on hand to take guests to locations such as the Grand Canyon, the ski resort Telluride and the White Sands National Monument. All these destinations can be reached within the hour, so passengers can enjoy a gourmet continental breakfast on the way there, happy in the knowledge that they'll be back at the hotel in time for a pre-dinner cocktail after a full day of exploring.

The holiday packages, which include the flights and two nights' accommodation, range in price from £1,500 to £3,900 (2,800 to 7,300) a head, and are generally booked by couples with something to celebrate.

"One couple flew to the Grand Canyon for their anniversary last year. We took them to a remote area and they had the entire space to themselves," says Lisa Hendrix, the hotel's spokesperson. "And instead of having the usual gourmet picnic lunch, they waited and ate a light supper as the sun set."

Money might not buy you love, but it can help you to understand yourself.

At Caneel Bay, a Rosewood resort on St John, one of the US Virgin Islands, you can take courses in self-love. The hotel has a Self Centre, dedicated to helping guests nurture their desires for mental, physical and spiritual well-being through an array of mind and body approaches for stress relief, relaxation, rejuvenation and a renewed sense of self. Customised sessions are tailor-made for guests interested in yoga, meditation or more unusual techniques such as body turning and Chinese energy medicine.

Rosewood has the answer for foodies as well. At the Hotel Seiyo Ginza in Tokyo, guests will soon be able to book a table for the world's most expensive meal. Next month sees the launch of the Hedonist Dinner for the wallet-exploding sum of £7,000 per person. The meal will be for 22 people and features the last existing bottle of 1870 Chateau Lafite Rothschild.

The definition of pure luxury in the world of hotels no longer depends on meeting the desires of

guests who expect the best of everything. It is about providing services that you didn't even know you needed.

The Ritz Carlton in Bachelor Gulch, Colorado employs a hot chocolate sommelier for the ski season, who will offer insights into the history of chocolate and the perfect ratio of chocolate, whipped cream and marshmallow.

The Four Seasons was perhaps the pioneer of luxury services and has been offering custom-made beds for years - a trend that most major hotel chains seem to have followed. According to Nicola Blazier, the chain's media relations manager, they sell "thousands [of mattresses, frames and linens] to guests by special request every year." To take things one step further, the Four Seasons Beverly Hills also offers a pillow menu: five different types of pillows suited to each guest's needs and preferences - if there are any besides the basic one of wanting to sleep.

The Four Seasons Milan offers portable phones that guests can use throughout the hotel, complete with a private number; in London, repeat guests can stow personal items such as toiletries and workout gear, so that when they return, these items are freshly pressed and stored in their rooms. The Four Seasons George V in Paris offers hour-glasses to tea-drinking customers in its restaurant so they can time to the second how long their tea is steeping; and at the Four Seasons Hotel Hampshire, which will open early next year, guests will be able to spend a day fishing in the south of England, then have their catch prepared and served by the hotel's executive chef.

The Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park in London offers picnic hamper menus, starting at £95 per person. This is not picnicking as we know it. The hamper includes Parma ham on focaccia with fig marmalade, poached lobster, and beef Wellington with Cumberland sauce. To drink there's Champagne and white wine.

At Cliff Villas in Bali, guests can call on a personal butler who is available 24/7, ready to do anything from fetch newspapers to decorate each guest's private garden with candles for dinner. Apparently the service is so good because the butlers have been coached by a former butler-trainer from Buckingham Palace.

Ikal del Mar Resort and Spa in Riviera Maya, Mexico, takes the butlering concept and gives it a bit of a twist.

Once guests have checked in they are visited by a soap concierge carrying a basket of fragrant soaps scented with everything from mint or oatmeal to honey, cinnamon and hibiscus. She recommends a different scent, depending on whether guests are looking for relief from stress or fatigue, and returns each day so guests can sample a different selection. She will even have a new soap made if the guest has a particular scent in mind.

Taking bathing rituals a stage further, bath butlers are now available in the UK.

Three hotels in the Rocce Forte group including the Balmoral in Edinburgh, the Lowry Hotel in Manchester and the St David's Hotel and Spa in Cardiff provide the service. Guests can choose from a range of six "detoxifying, rejuvenating and relaxing" baths. The baths change seasonally to "capture the essences of spring/summer and autumn/winter", says a hotel spokesperson. Bath butlers will even provide a post-bath canapé menu to keep the bubbles flowing with a bottle of

Veuve Clicquot accompanied by a selection of chocolate-dipped strawberries.

Luxury hotels are particularly keen on pleasing lovers. At the Don CeSar Beach Resort in Florida, couples are presented with a copy of The 50 Greatest Love Letters of All Time, as well as stationery and a fountain pen and sent off to express their love to one another for posterity. The mornings begin with breakfast in bed and end with a turn down service that includes selected love letters between the hotel's developer, Thomas Rowe, and his long lost love, Lucinda, being left on the pillow.

Two Ritz Carlton hotels offer a service for prospective fiancés - in Grand Cayman there's an engagement concierge and in Key Biscayne, Florida, there's a proposal concierge. "A lot of our guests come in from New York and are too busy to plan their proposal," says Verona Carter, regional director of public relations for the Ritz Carlton's Caribbean properties. "All they need to do is get the ring and tell our concierge what they'd like and she runs with it, so all the husband-to-be need do is sit back and enjoy this luxury." The hotels arrange secluded dinners, candlelight and even private musicians, mostly on the beach. What they can't arrange, however, is whether the woman will accept.

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