

April 19, 2009

## In Europe, Hostels Grow Up

By JENNIFER CONLIN

ALMOST three decades after the fact, I can still recall with frightening clarity my first time at a youth hostel. What was billed in my "Let's Go Europe" book as a "historic" Irish hostel in a "castle," turned out to be a crumbling tower with no heat, stone floors and mildewed mattresses. I vowed never to stay in a hostel again.

Yet having heard that the hostel scene, while still being unbelievably cheap, had changed significantly over the years, I decided to try again — only this time, rather than being accompanied by a cute male hitchhiker, I had my teenage daughters in tow. And so it was with great trepidation that I approached the [London Central Youth Hostel](#) on a Friday evening in mid-March.

"Will there be sheets and blankets?" asked Harriet, my 17-year-old. "Please tell me there will be a TV," said Florence, her 13-year-old sister. They have never stayed in anything but a full-service hotel, and usually one with a minibar, room service and a power shower.

"Of course," I answered, entirely unsure. I wondered if we, clad in urban outfits with rolling suitcases in tow, should have been wearing rain ponchos and carrying huge backpacks.

Moments later we were standing in front of a stylish, modern building with gleaming plate-glass windows. I was certain I had the wrong address. Though I had read that YHA Ltd. recently invested about \$8.4 million to renovate this hostel near Regent's Park, it seemed too good to be true. Where was the peeling paint? Why wasn't laundry hanging from the windows? Why wasn't there a drunken student passed out on the stoop?

Instead, as we walked through the sliding glass doors into the entrance hall, I admired the floor-to-ceiling illuminated map of the London Tube system, as well as a good-looking 40-something man with a briefcase getting off the elevator. Already, things seemed different.

The girls quickly disappeared into what in my day would have been called the common room — typically a gathering place for grubby guests, complete with threadbare springy sofas, a rattling tea cart and a makeshift library of discarded travel books in every language but your own.

I braced myself and followed behind only to be shocked by the scene before me. The room could have been a model set for the [Ikea](#) catalog with brightly colored sofas and chairs arranged around sparkling white laminated tables.

One wall was decorated with enlarged photos of London landmarks — a red mailbox, an Oxford Street sign, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. Flanking the wall was a blackboard with information on the latest museum exhibitions, food and clothing markets, and shows. Mounted to the ceiling were several flat-screen televisions, including one showing a slide show of people partying in the hostel where we stood; Florence was mesmerized.

At one end of the room was a sleek, well-stocked bar. (In my day, most hostels had strict no-alcohol policies, hence the need for the big backpack.) Opposite was a line of computers, where Harriet was already logged on.

Two older women with trendy haircuts and rectangular-framed glasses were enjoying their drinks at one table, and at another sat a family playing cards. There was not a single poncho in sight.

Most of the room was filled with young hipsters in low-slung jeans and tight T-shirts who did not seem to care that a parent was present, let alone a grandparent or two.

Watching my girls as they sang along to the background [music](#) of Coldplay, I couldn't imagine them being any happier at the £250-a-night Mandarin Oriental hotel across town. Instead, we were going to pay £89 (\$133.50 at \$1.50 to the pound) for a room that slept four, complete with a private bath.

"I love this place," Florence announced, ready to check out our room upstairs. I peeped over Harriet's shoulder and saw her update her [Facebook](#) status. It read: "Harriet is hanging out in a cool London hostel."

In the world of hip city hostels, who cares if your room has nothing but a bed (often a bunk), a simple bath (a shower with no bath products) and a small cupboard with no hangers? Common rooms, meanwhile, are often minimally — but stylishly — furnished with Scandinavian-style sofas and tables.

Countering the lack of amenities, there is usually an eclectic bar, a 24-hour Internet cafe with Wi-Fi, group tours around the city, entertainment (D.J.'s, live music and karaoke nights), kitchens where you can make your own meals or a restaurant where you can buy one — all providing a built-in social life for travelers.

Hostels across Europe have undergone a transformation over the last decade. "There has been serious quality improvement in the hostel movement," said Johan Krüger, head of communications for Hostelling International, a consortium of youth hostel associations in over 80 countries that operate more than 4,000 hostels.

"Though hostels have always had the big shared dormitory-style rooms, we are now seeing more demand among travelers for double or single en suite rooms," Mr. Krüger said, adding that hostels had grown even more popular in the midst of the recession. In 2008, Hostelling International had a 14 percent increase, to 1.4 million bookings, on its Web site, [www.hihostels.com](http://www.hihostels.com).

Mr. Krüger attributes the increased interest in smaller rooms to a changing clientele. "We are seeing [business travelers](#) coming to hostels now," he said, speculating that in addition to the lower rates, they also prefer the social aspect of a hostel to the more staid hotel culture.

"Ten to 15 years ago, hostels were more commonly associated with the countryside for hikers and walkers," said Duncan Simpson, head of communications for YHA Ltd., a youth hostel organization for [England](#) and [Wales](#) and a Hostelling International affiliate. "But we operate in cities and are now attracting customers who not only come to us because it is good value for the money, but also because they want a different, more relaxed experience than you get at a hotel."

YHA's newest project in London, the \$1.5 million renovation of the St. Pancras hostel, hopes to attract yet another growing customer base — the family. It has rooms designed for families, Wi-Fi in the common rooms, a restaurant open from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., even cribs.

"At a hostel you don't have to worry that your child is going to knock over an ornamental lamp in the lobby," Mr. Simpson said. "The whole atmosphere is more casual."

Tim Hierath, one of five owners who founded the [Circus](#) hostel in [Berlin](#) nearly a decade ago, has noticed a changing demographic in his guests, too. "Beyond the classic student backpackers," Mr. Hierath said, "we get young urban professionals on a city break, families vacationing, business travelers and even older tourists."

Most travelers are probably attracted by the great rates, he said. Group rooms with a shared bath start at 19 euros a person a night, while a single room with a private bath is 50 euros (\$68 at \$1,36 to the euro); one- and two-bedroom penthouse apartments are 85 and 140 euros, respectively. The younger clientele is probably drawn to the hostel's popular subterranean bar, Goldman's, he added, where there are framed photos of the American actor David Hasselhoff, vintage video consoles and décor straight from a '70s Florida condo.

"We like the atmosphere here," said Gudula Danyer, 69, from Fulda, [Germany](#), who was traveling with a group of similarly aged friends and staying at the Circus. "It is different, and the price is good," she said, adding that it was also fun for the group to stay in one room.

Abbey Rose, 29, from [Chicago](#), agreed. Usually she stays in hotels, but she chose the Circus because "it seemed fun and funky."

"This is actually better than a hotel," said David Jones, 23, from [San Francisco](#), who was also staying there. "It's easier to meet people, and cheaper."

So what is the difference between a hostel and budget hotel? "A hostel is about community spirit," Mr. Hierath said. "The entire atmosphere here is one in which it is easy to get to know other people. It is not uncommon for guests to make friends and go off and do things together."

He said his hostel staff members will help guests rent [bikes](#) or recommend off-the-beaten-path tours of the city, including a vacant airport from the days of World War II. (At the London Central hostel, the receptionist helped us arrange discounted theater tickets.)

It is curious that hostels are so popular in cities given that when the movement began, 100 years ago, it was to encourage people to leave the cities and explore the countryside. In the early 1900s Richard Schirrmann, a German teacher, opened the first hostel in Burg Altena in the Rhine Valley (it's still open for business). Over the next two decades, 12 more youth hostels were built. This, in turn, led to the formation of the International Youth Hostel Federation (now Hostelling International) in 1932.

Since then, hostelling has been an accepted form of travel throughout Europe for all age groups. Europeans are typically introduced to hostels when they are young. "We have a lot of summer camp programs through schools for 11- to 18-year-olds to get them out into the countryside," said Mr. Simpson of YHA.

Americans usually first encounter hostelling during college and then, usually, abandon it — as in my case. "It is definitely true that we get fewer American families than European ones," Mr. Simpson said. "But we still get a lot of young people from the States."

He said that on average in England and Wales, the hostel association has about 35,000 American visitors a year, the fourth-largest national group after Germans, French and Australians. Last year, Hostelling International also noted that American online users were the largest group to book stays on its Web site.

Linda and John Wetherby of [Alaska](#) began staying in hostels in Europe when they were teenagers. Even after marrying and becoming parents (their daughter Aelwen is now 25), they continued staying in hostels. The family tries to travel every other year to Europe for at least a month.

"There is no question it has changed a lot," said Mr. Wetherby, 60, an anesthesiologist based in [Anchorage](#). "Now it is easy to find clean private rooms with a bath of your own in a hostel, as well as Internet access." He said they often stay in city hostels — most recently in [Madrid](#) and London — something rare among Americans in their age group.

“I think when people here grow up and make a real income, they want to spend it on decent accommodations,” said Ms. Wetherby, 63, who works in public education. The Wetherbys are “outdoor, unostentatious people, who just want a clean, safe place to sleep,” she said, adding that they would rather spend their vacation time and dollars at plays, restaurants and museums.

They also like the community aspect of the hostel. “Sometimes I have had to travel on my own before meeting up with Aelwen and John,” Ms. Wetherby said, referring to her daughter and husband, “and have met people I have then taken the train with to the next city.” She said security is a factor for her as a woman traveling alone at times.

Indeed, hostels are particularly safe, with doors locked after a certain hour at night and staff members at the reception desk 24 hours. “You don’t feel so alone when you stay in a hostel,” Ms. Rose from Chicago said of her stay at the Circus hostel in Berlin.

In fact, most remarkable is the casual mixing of age groups. “Often, when our daughter was young, a traveling student would want to play a game with her because they missed their younger siblings back home,” Ms. Wetherby said.

She now finds that students offer to help her with her bags. “Once they talk to me they learn that I am a younger old person that they can really have a conversation with,” she said. “When you speak to people from different countries it opens up your mind so much.”

Still, some things never change. On a recent Saturday night at the Circus, where merriment is cheap (during happy hour at Goldman’s a small glass of beer was only a euro, and at the London Central hostel a double shot of gin, rum or vodka with cola or tonic was just £3.70), guests of all ages began to empty the bar around 1 a.m.

Thirty-year-olds, reliving their glory years, stumbled up the stairs and into the awaiting elevator, pausing at a nearby trash can a bit too long, having overindulged in the cheap beer. The clientele may be getting older, but not necessarily any wiser.

Meanwhile, back in London, my daughters and I were firmly tucked into our comfy bunk beds by 11 p.m. after a meal in Chinatown and an amusing walk around Leicester Square. As we talked in the dark until midnight with no television to break our chatter, I began planning our next trip, perhaps to [Krakow](#), where the Hostel Deco has named every room after an actress, or to the [Urbany](#) in [Barcelona](#), a recently opened green hostel with a rooftop terrace, or [Oops!](#) near the Latin Quarter of [Paris](#), decorated with wild wallpaper.

At these cheap rates, the possibilities suddenly seemed endless. I vowed never to stay in a hotel again. Though I am sure I will break that promise, in this economy it would certainly make sense to keep it.

NOT EXACTLY THE GRAND TOUR, BUT NOT EXACTLY ROUGHING IT, EITHER

Low cost and chic, urban hostels are a viable alternative to the boutique hotel. While most hostels provide bedding, towels must often be rented for a small fee. Most rooms have individual reading lights and outlets for charging batteries, and all have storage facilities. Though hostels are open to the public, some have a temporary nightly membership fee you must pay unless you choose to buy an annual membership (often worth it if you are staying more than just a few nights). It is also common to pay for your room upon arrival. Among the best Web sites for finding hostels in [Europe](#) are [www.hostelbookers.com](http://www.hostelbookers.com); [www.hihostels.com](http://www.hihostels.com); and [www.hostelworld.com](http://www.hostelworld.com).

[LONDON](#)

London Central Youth Hostel (104 Bolsover Street; 44-845-371-9154; [www.yha.org.uk](http://www.yha.org.uk)) is five minutes from Oxford Street and Regent's Park. It has a 24-hour cafe/bar, Internet access, Wi-Fi, a self-service kitchen and a laundry. There is even a plasma-screen and Nintendo Wii. Prices for May range from £19.95 (about \$30 at \$1.50 to the pound) per adult for a single bed in a shared room with no bath to £136.95 for a six-bed family room with its own bath. Temporary membership fees of £3 per adult and £1.50 per child a night are payable upon arrival. Annual memberships are available.

## BERLIN

The Circus (Weinbergsweg 1a; 49-30-2000-3939; [www.circus-berlin.de](http://www.circus-berlin.de)) is in the Mitte district, the heart of the city. There are a cafe and bar, and Wi-Fi in every room. The hostel can arrange airport pickup. Prices are 19 euros (about \$26 at \$1.36 to the euro) for a bed in an eight-person room to 140 euros for a four-person, two-bedroom penthouse apartment with kitchen and bath.

## PARIS

Oops! (50, avenue des Gobelins; 33-01-47-07-47-00; [www.oops-paris.com](http://www.oops-paris.com)) is near the Latin Quarter. All rooms have air-conditioning and private bathrooms. Dorm rooms are 23 euros a person in the low season (usually November through February) and 30 euros a person in the high season. Private rooms are 70 euros in the low season and 80 euros in the high season. All rates include breakfast, Internet, Wi-Fi and luggage storage.

## BARCELONA

Urbany (Avinguda Meridiana, 97; 34-93-24-58-414; [www.barcelonaurbany.com](http://www.barcelonaurbany.com)) has self-service kitchens, a laundry, a bar, a rooftop terrace and a common room with PlayStation consoles, DVDs and games. Guests may also use a fitness club nearby, which has a pool and sauna. All rooms have private baths, Wi-Fi and air-conditioning. Beds in an eight-room dorm are from 12 euros a night, and from 25 euros for a double. All rates include breakfast. Half- and full-board options are available, with meals at the Tolc bar/restaurant.

## ROME

Yellow (Via Palestro, 44; 39-06-49-382-682; [www.yellowhostel.com](http://www.yellowhostel.com)) is normally restricted to guests between 18 and 40, though 17-year-olds may stay under some circumstances. Dorm rooms are all mixed gender and some have private baths. Rates are 35 euros for a four-bed room with a private bath and 24 euros for a mixed-gender dorm with no bathroom. There are Internet access (laptops can be rented), a game room and a bar. The Yellow offers an inexpensive breakfast (French toast for 3 euros), with a menu that changes monthly.

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