

Capsule hotels

Thinking small

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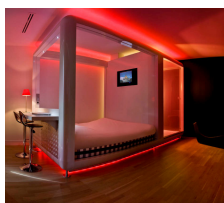
Hotels with tiny rooms, pioneered in Japan, are spreading and evolving

WITH their tiny, cupboard-like rooms and prices as low as ¥2,000 (\$18) a night, capsule hotels have existed in Japan since the 1980s, but have not caught on elsewhere. They have, however, helped to inspire a new breed of inexpensive, no-frills hotels outside Japan that are not quite as small and not quite as cheap. In 2005 easyGroup, the parent company of easyJet, a low-cost airline, opened easyHotels in Hungary, Switzerland and Britain, with rooms from \$22 a night. (As you would expect, extra amenities, such as windows or television, cost extra.) The latest examples of the genre, which opened this year, have added a further twist: they combine small rooms at low prices with cutting-edge design and technology.

Yotel, a British company, opened its first hotel inside London's Gatwick airport in July. Its tiny rooms, or "cabins" (pictured), draw inspiration from both Japanese capsule hotels and the first-class accommodation on a British Airways airliner. The "premium cabin" contains a full-sized foldaway bed, a toilet and shower, electrical points, a desk, free wireless-internet access and a flat-panel television. The "standard cabin" has a slightly smaller bed. Room rates start at £25 (\$52) for four hours or £55 per night. The company will open another hotel at Heathrow airport on December 1st, and plans a third at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport in early 2008. This hotel will be behind the security cordon, which should appeal to travellers with connecting flights.



We can squeeze you in tonight



Amsterdam is also the site of the first mini-sized hotel in a chain called **Qbic** being launched by a Dutch start-up company. Its rooms, starting at €39 (\$57), have adjustable mood lighting ("Mellow Yellow", "Red Romance" or "Deep Purple Love") along with a flat-panel TV, wireless-internet access and bathroom fittings designed by Philippe Starck. Like a low-cost airline, **Qbic** keeps prices down with online booking and self-service check-in.

Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, New York's Pod Hotel, which opened this year in midtown Manhattan, offers a double room with a bath from \$109 and a single room from \$89. Its success shows that customers do not mind small rooms (on average, American hotel rooms are three times the size) provided they are in a prime location.

All this illustrates that an "era of experimentation" is under way in the hotel industry, says Jennifer Fiorentino of Jupiter Research, a consultancy. Although there are no hard numbers on the quantity of capsule-like hotels around the world, she says, both Yotel and Qbic are moving forward plans for additional properties in 2008, which suggests that tiny rooms could have a big future.