

Rooms and Hotels you may never know about . *Max and Mark*



Outdoor terrace of the JW Terrace Suite at Essex House in New York, overlooking Central Park.

The Retreat at the Blue Lagoon-a low-slung, 62-suite escape that lurks half-hidden in the rugged landscape just outside Reykjavik-has only been open for three months, and it's already one of the buzziest luxury spots in Europe. Perched on the edge of the geothermally heated pool for which it's named, it features floor-to-ceiling windows with spectacular views across the lava rock, plus a spa that offers in-lagoon massages. Guests get one especially attractive perk: after-hours access to the spectacular natural site, whose waters are packed with crowds during peak times.

But within the retreat lies one ultra-exclusive space that few visitors will ever know exists. Spread across two levels and 2,100 square feet, the Blue Lagoon suite is almost triple the size of any other. It has a private balcony overlooking the lava landscape, a kitchen and dining room, and a king-size bedroom with walk-in closet. Best of all, it has its own private spa, complete with a steam bath, sauna, fireplace, and a private bathing area within the lagoon.

The catch? The lavish suite costs \$US10,500 per night, with a two-night minimum-and it's not listed on the hotel's website. No photographs, no description, nothing at all.



Presidential Suite Living Room of Essex House, New York.

The secret world of unlisted hotel suites

The Blue Lagoon suite is like a cross between an unlisted phone number and a house seat at a theater: You can't find it unless you already know it's there, and booking is by invitation only. At high-end hotels around the world, these unlisted rooms are a subtle staple, with *raisons d'être* as varied as the rooms themselves.

According to Mar Masson, the hotel's director of marketing, the Blue Lagoon suite is intended as the ultimate hideaway. For those who want to slip in unnoticed, a private entrance and nearby helipad allow discreet, private connections from Keflavik International Airport.

"No one ever need to know you're there," he says. "It's not visible to other guests, and there is nothing that indicates it is there."

Mint conditions

Privacy isn't the only reason to keep a room unlisted, whether on a hotel's own site or on partners. Sometimes it's about protecting your most valuable asset.

When a travel agency like Axis travel centre in south australia has to cater for VIP clients or clients who just want "something really special" certain Hotels, resorts and rooms they are aware of are not listed anywhere and they use their expertise and connections to deliver "something special".

Max Najar, Director "When you establish connections around the world, you get to trust them and rely upon them to deliver the goods. I especially like to follow the Hotel and resort managers (and them me!) to stay connected and allow our clients to get the best value deals and the best rooms, locations and sweet spots. It is not always the lowest price but it is the best value"

"Let's say you have a top suite that costs \$US2,000," says hospitality vet Stephen Brandman, who runs management firm Journal Hotels. "You don't want 10 people coming together and each throwing in \$200 so they can have a big party. Think about it. A load of high school prom students rent a penthouse, and all of a sudden you've got a big problem."

New York University hospitality professor Bjorn Hanson agrees. "Rooms that have something fragile about them—the art, a Steinway grand piano—where there's too much risk of wear and tear will be held back," he says. "They won't be available to the public but assigned to VIPs."

Often these types of rooms are referred to as "owner's suites." At the soon-to-open Hotel Bennett in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, Michael Bennett's one-bedroom, 2,000-square-foot suite is only available by special request. Even then, guests are only confirmed after personal signoff from the developer himself.

At other properties, they're called "partnership rooms," which means they're only available through exclusive membership clubs that require six-figure buy-ins. At Paradise Beach on the Caribbean island of Nevis, two of the resort's new beach houses—which sit on stilts at the water's edge—can only be rented via Exclusive Resorts LLC, a vacation club whose initiation fee is \$US125,000.

By invitation only

Economically speaking, it may seem counterintuitive to keep your most expensive product shielded from public view. But hotels prefer not to shoulder the risk of a last-minute, fee-free cancellation on a pricey suite, and splurging travellers are more prone to last-minute pangs of guilt than a wealthy

regular. For this reason, the JW Marriott Essex House in New York and San Francisco's St. Regis require their penthouse suites to be booked via email-it gives managers time to vet potential stays before confirming a reservation.



The Magic Hour rooftop bar at New York's Moxy Hotel

Of course, there's also the perennial question asked by rejected walk-ins at hospitals and restaurants: "What would you do if Beyonce dropped in?" At many hotels, a few luxury rooms are always kept empty in case a valued VIP decides to stay on a whim. These aren't always celebrities; they can simply be big spenders. At the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas, for instance, the 21 Boulevard penthouses are entirely unlisted, unbookable, and reserved for those who spend a cool million in the high-roller lounge.

"A unique way that Axis Travel centre has, especially with my own database of Priority Portfolio clients, is to make sure that we guard our secrets closely and that a very intimate and personal accommodation experience is delivered to our clients, even if it means changing the bedsheets, towels, soaps, color schemes and arranging a Chef onsite or well versed in what is expected from our clients." said Max Najar , of Axis travel centre.

Exceptions to the rules

Unlisted rooms aren't always the biggest or the most glamorous. Sometimes, they're botched or rejected prototypes for renovations that have hung around for financial reasons. And sometimes they're just unusually small or oddly shaped. According to travel industry analyst Henry Harteveltdt of Atmosphere Research Group, these broom-closet-size rooms are most common in older, Grand Hotel-era properties, which were "built to serve people who travelled with staff, like a personal butler, a valet or a maid."

Harteveltdt says while many of those cramped quarters have been knocked together or reconfigured, such renovations aren't always possible, leading hoteliers to turn them into cheaper, secret rooms that are held in reserve. That's how New York's Moxy Hotel in Times Square-which was built in 1907 as the Mills Hotel-ended up with its 120-square-foot Crashpad rooms. They're priced at just \$US99 per night and are truly off-menu: They're only bookable off the drinks menu at the Magic Hour rooftop bar, for guests that have had one martini too many.



A living room in one of Boulevard Suites at the Cosmopolitan. *Photo: The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas*

In other words: Don't assume that all of your options are listed on a hotel's website. And know that like any good secret, unlisted suites are always at risk of going public.

"Honestly, we might put it out there at some point," says Masson of the Blue Lagoon suite, meaning listing it publicly, not talking to us for this article. "But for now, we want it to be like a hidden gem."

"I respect that not every Hotel or resort wants the standard consumer to know all of their assets that they have and deliberately want to target specific clients, which I respect. Also our clients who get delivery of that product through Axis Travel or my Priority Portfolio client database also respect this notion. To try and offer every Hotel, every room and every nuance to a client via any brochure or website is absolutely impossible and useless. The best part in my experiences is that there are many Hotels and resorts that have a zero website presence. You cannot even track them, and they represent some of the best places to stay in the world!" says Max Najar of Axis travel Centre.