



NYP

Travel

WOW!
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San Diego RT
(and other
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P. 50

GOODS TO GO
Carry-on bags
with sex appeal

**HUDSON
VALLEY HIGH**
Where to have the
perfect weekend

HIDING OUT

From the sands of the Caribbean
to the wilds of South Africa, a guide
to the ultimate new retreats



If you're not imagining yourself here right now (it's the Beach House in Barbuda), you need to stop reading and seek medical attention.

FULL-SERVICE

HOW do you spell fantastic service? C-H-I-C-A-G-O, according to reader polls in the glossy mags, where Windy City hotels often top the charts for service, with addresses like The Peninsula and Ritz-Carlton duking it out for supremacy. The secret? Peninsula spokesperson Susan Ellefson blames good old "Midwestern hospitality."



I think Icon: Cozy up to Houston's newest luxury hideout.



The Zetter's rooftop studios are some of London's most imaginative rooms.

environment you can barely see it when on game drives in the surrounding hills.

Each luxury suite, accessed by a raised wooden pathway, has floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors that overlook the river, and bathrooms include a private open-air shower close to the water — yes, you can see hippos as you bathe, and baboons on the red rock cactus-covered cliffs opposite. Your balcony even has a second mattress; sleep outside if you like.

Apart from leisurely game drives, afternoons spent lounging by the pool, and trips to the art gallery and Bush Spa located a short walk away, the highlight is simply relaxing on the shady platform lounge — with its plantation chairs, African pots, sofas, and chess sets. Breakfasts are served here, and you can watch the sun glint on the water below as you sip coffee.

Checking in: Doubles from \$1,900, all-inclusive; singita.com.

Douglas Rogers

HOTEL ICON Houston

It's the little things that can make an good hotel great — something Houston's Hotel Icon seems to have understood from the moment it opened last winter in a decrepit bank building in Space City's ever more interesting downtown.

The Icon foregoes the trend toward grand, intimidating guest rooms, instead turning each into a unique, unapologetically masculine chamber appointed with its own color scheme. Beds are cozy and substantial; sumptuous baths open onto the sleeping area. Heavenly, fluffy towels, the kind they

don't sell at Ikea, make the picture complete.

It's like spending the weekend at the Victorian home of a rich grandmother.

That pattern continues in the Icon's common areas, where an unobtrusive entrance leads you to a lounge crammed with details that evoke 1920s noir: an antique grandfather clock, stained-glass art deco lamps, matriarchal sitting-room chairs. Agatha Christie would've had a field day.

Visiting celebrities and Houston's resident beautiful people flock to the spa, to chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's BANK restaurant and to the Whiskey, Rande Gerber's balcony bar — but

the outstanding hotel staff's friendly and meticulous but not fawning attention to "just folks" is what makes Icon the traveler's first choice in America's fourth-largest city.

Checking in: Rooms from \$195; hotelicon.com

Michael Y. Park

THE ZETTER London

A lack of space proves useful at this 59-room hotel, opened in London's chic Clerkenwell quarter back in March. With little lobby space on hand, the central gathering place becomes the lively bar and restaurant — glass-walled and sheathed in natural light by day, and

open to the slightly Dickensian darkness of the still redeveloping neighborhood at night.

Glass sliding doors welcome you into the foyer, where a multicultural crew of informal but attentive staff is actually smiling. A few steps up on the right is the non-smoking bar area at the bottom of a 5-story atrium, with a quirky selection of white and brown flea-market sofas, and huge corks scattered around — the whole thing calls to mind rumpus rooms of the 1970's.

Every room is enhanced by sensual lighting schemes, and by a state-of-the-art entertainment system. Animal wallpaper patterns and

used Penguin paperbacks bring a touch of whimsy, too.

The rooftop extension accommodates seven incredible studio rooms — all have balconies with amazing views — while champagne vending machines spit out invitations to reckless indulgence. Its own brand of bottled water dooses any morning-after thirst.

Checking in: Rooms from \$229; thezetter.com.

Simon Su

RIAD FARNATCHI Marrakech, Morocco

Tucked away in an alley at the heart of Marrakech's

● GO NOW



Safari, so good:
Kick back at Sweni
in South Africa.

Desperately seeking



Poolside at Sweni: All that's missing is you.

BORED with chilly **DESIGN** and standoffish staffers? Say hello to a **NEW** generation of **HOTELS** that are **LEARNING** the art of blending **STYLE** and **COMFORT**

MAYBE it's the instability of global politics, or maybe we're just tired of being uncomfortable, but a dramatic shift in the world of hotels is taking place before our eyes.

Whereas during the 1990s we wanted nothing more than for everything to look really good, now we're discovering that what we often had to sacrifice was comfort.

What we really want, most of all, is a comfortable place to sleep — somewhere to escape whatever's happening beyond the front door — hold the lobby-as-nightclub.

Happily, hoteliers are getting the message. For proof, come along on a ride around the world, as we check in to the best new hotels.

THE BEACH HOUSE Barbuda

The island of Barbuda's beaches are the stuff of dreams, especially 17-mile-long Palmetto, where millions of rosy shells brought by the tides lace the shores with ribbons of pink. The tiny island, twin to Antigua, — located to the east of Puerto Rico — has just three hotels, relatively few tourists, and a population of 1,200. It offers sun, seclusion and a sense of the old Caribbean.

The Beach House, situated on Palmetto Point, is a low-key, up-market oasis whose décor and architecture maximize the property's million-dollar location.

Instead of solid walls, the

Club House — the villa-like living and dining area — features rows of louvered shutters that raise to reveal sweeping views of the turquoise Caribbean. Sit here and be soothed by the constant sound of breaking surf and breezes in the palms.

A man-made lagoon stretches in front of the guest rooms, each deck divided by sheer white curtains that billow in the breeze. A four-poster bed sits squarely in front of the sliding glass doors, bringing the ocean closer to you.

But the 21-room Beach House, which debuted in April, is not just a pretty face. The property emphasizes service. Upon arrival, each guest meets his or her personal ambassador, an island woman willing to unpack, draw a bath, press clothes, do laundry, arrange outings and bring hot, tired travelers cold cloths and cooling mint tea.

Part butler, part nanny,

these vacation angels make the Beach House the perfect place to unwind in style.

Checking in: Rooms from \$500, including full breakfast daily, plus one half-hour massage per person (thebeachhousebarbuda.net).

Candace Stape

SINGITA SWENI LODGE Kruger Park, South Africa

When Oscar-winning actress Charlize Theron needed to escape the paparazzi on her recent return to South Africa, she retreated to a secluded, six-suite lodge on the Mozambique border of Kruger National Park: Singita Sweni.

Opened last November, little sister to the white, airy loft-style Singita Lebombo, Sweni is an earthier, classical property, tucked into the slopes of a bush-covered hillside overlooking the muddy Sweni River. Done in tree green and polished ebony tones, with a latticed-wood roof, Singita Sweni merges so perfectly with its