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Eat in and Never Change a Light Bulb



Julien Jourdes for The New York Times

A living area, left, and lobby in the AKA Central Park in New York.

By ELAINE GLUSAC
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WILLIAM KUTNEY tends to think of his temporary accommodations in New Jersey as a home away from home. He has a full kitchen, flat-panel television and, of course, Wi-Fi. He attends happy hours there, and the staff handles his dry cleaning. But he doesn't have to change a light bulb or commit to a lease, which gives his current suite an edge over his previous six-month stint living in a furnished apartment in Indiana for work.

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Kevin Moloney for the New York Times
A Hyatt Summerfield suite in Denver.

"Here, if the contract ends, I can be out of the hotel tomorrow," said Mr. Kutney, 27, a financial industry consultant from Dallas who has been staying at the Hyatt Summerfield Suites in Morristown since December. "The staff helps make it nice, and you don't have to do your own sheets."

Meant to serve the 20 percent of travelers — many of them on business — who check in for five or more nights, extended-stay hotels were a 1980s innovation, offering larger closets, living areas, full kitchens, laundry rooms and discounts for guests who were willing to stay in what were

often out-of-the-way suburban locations. They were aimed at budget customers, who dealt with fluorescent-lighted work space, cheap kitchen counters and part-time reception staff. But as the number of such hotels has risen, so has the quality. There are now more services, better designs and, in some cases, locations in actual cities.

Hyatt's new 19-unit Summerfield Suites, which it bought last year and plans to expand by adding 11 locations this year, offers free grocery shopping service, swimming pools and outdoor grills. In 2008, [Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide](#) plans to introduce Element Hotel, an extended-stay chain with a loft-style design and "green" elements, like low-flow toilets. AKA hotels, based in Philadelphia, recently opened two properties in Manhattan, two in suburban Washington, D.C. and one this month in Philadelphia, each with designer kitchens, 400-thread-count sheets and flat-screen TVs.

Established contenders like Residence Inn by Marriott are honing their appeal with more contemporary décor and

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features like outdoor fire pits. Homewood Suites by Hilton, which ranked highest for satisfaction in the extended-stay category in a 2007 J. D. Power & Associates survey, will replace all its beds and allow guests to choose their suite through an online program by the year's end. Staybridge Suites, managed by InterContinental Hotels Group, has begun adding screening rooms for sports and movie watchers.

"We've reached a level of maturity in extended stay where a greater range of services and amenities is important," said Bjorn Hanson, a lodging consultant with PricewaterhouseCoopers. The market for high-end extended-stay rooms — where rates average \$117 a night, more than double the low-end average of \$54.82 — grew 7.3 percent in the first six months of 2007, according to Smith Travel Research, a database information group. Overall occupancy in all extended-stay rooms, 73.6 percent, is 10 percentage points above the national average; the rate among the top tier is even higher, at 75.2 percent.

"You see a lot of people traveling on the road doing training seminars and consulting, which benefits the extended-stay category," said Jan Freitag, vice president of Smith Travel Research.

The downside is often giving up city locations for suburban or business park locations. Guests can't get room service, except for those staying at AKA hotels, which usually have restaurants in adjacent areas. Most extended-stay hotels restrict food service to free self-serve breakfasts. Their business centers rarely offer full services, though most offer free Wi-Fi.

And, of course, guests share living space with strangers. "It will always feel like a hotel if you don't have a home," said Connie Miller, 52, who had been living for four months at the Hyatt Summerfield Suites near Denver while her husband, a mining consultant, relocates for work. "Privacy is an issue."

Such complaints are difficult to satisfy, but new high-end extended-stay hotels hope to raise aesthetics, as well as rates. Element hotels, for example, will offer uncluttered lobbies with 16-foot windows, as well as generous showers and sectional couches in the guest rooms. Microbrew beers will be served around fire pits at happy hours. Starwood plans to open 500 Element hotels in 10 years, with the first in Lexington, Mass., to open in July 2008, at rates 10 to 15 percent above what competitors charge.

Amenities at AKA hotels include luxury kitchen appliances, mosaic-tiled showers and choices of pillows.

"Nobody was going after the person who was going to be here for a long stay who would normally stay at the Four Seasons on a short stay," said Larry Korman, a co-president of the Korman Communities, which buys condominiums that are under construction and converts them to luxury extended-stay hotels. Rates vary by location and length of stay, but dip to \$255 per night for 30 days at the new AKA Central Park.

Even existing hotels are polishing their acts. "Expectations are different and it's more competitive," said Robert Radomski, vice president of brand management for Staybridge, which will add more than 21 locations this year, its busiest yet. In 2006, the hotel began upgrading its suites with walk-in showers and granite vanities, and built home theaters in public areas, with leather seats for up to 15 people to sit before a 60-inch monitor.

To make its properties friendlier, Residence Inn by Marriott has added basketball and volleyball courts as well as pools and fire pits. "The residential atmosphere is very important to us," said Rich Rollison, an American Army liaison officer for South Korea. He books up to 500 guests a year at the Residence Inn Arlington-Pentagon City for officials and officers coming to the capital for meetings. "When you have a 10-day stay, you get tired of going out to eat. Suites are critical to what we do."

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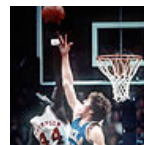
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