Capsule hotels

Thinking small

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

With their tiny 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 (1) of inexpensive, no-frills hotel 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 (2): they combine small rooms at low prices with cutting-edge (3) design and technology.

Yotel, a British company, opened its first hotel inside London’s Gatwick airport in July. Its tiny rooms, or "cabins" 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. 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.

Amsterdam is also the site of the first mini-sized hotel in a chain called Qbic being launched by a Dutch start-up company. Like a low-cost airline, Qbic keeps prices down with online booking and self-service check-in.

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

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Notes:
(1) breed = type
(2) twist = development
(3) cutting-edge = most advanced