

Members only

Hard hit by the pandemic, members clubs are in vogue again as ever more hotels offer these exclusive, private facilities

‘We provide a sense of apartment-style living with access to hotel services and a private club facility’

LEFT:
The library at The Other House in South Kensington
BELOW:
A Club Flat at The Other House

Members clubs have departed from their 17th century origin as gentlemen's clubs. For one, they are no longer reserved for men, while stuffy dress codes have largely disappeared. What's remained, however, are the networking opportunities, expensive fees and exclusivity.

While the past two years have seen such clubs either shuttered or pivoting to virtual formats due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interest is now booming for the industry. Here we look at the new concepts emerging in the wake of the pandemic, the international reach of such clubs and the criteria to join.

Hybrid hotels

Luxury hotels have begun to cross over into the private sphere, incorporating exclusive members clubs into their projects to draw in both travellers and locals seeking a social space. For the duration of their stay, hotel guests get the privilege of becoming members – a way to trial the benefits. In the US, Aman Resorts has debuted a club at its recently opened property Aman New York, with the members-only space on the 14th and 15th floors featuring a

cigar lounge and private wine library. Members also get access to all hotel facilities and priority reservations at its restaurants and jazz club.

The west coast, meanwhile, has seen the launch of the six-storey 8,826 sqm members club and hotel The Aster in Los Angeles. The club is from Salt Hotels, whose portfolio includes Hotel Greystone in Miami Beach and Hutton Brickyards in New York. “We identified a gap in the market where people were looking for a members club offering with the same standard of service as the world's leading boutique luxury hotels,” a spokesperson tells me. The club includes 35 all-suite hotel rooms, each with workspaces and lounges, and facilities including a swimming pool, restaurants, a screening room, cabaret lounge and recording studio – it's Hollywood, after all.

Closer to home, a number of exciting new concepts are being launched in London. Lifestyle brand The Other House, which blends apartment-style living with club facilities, opened its first ‘Residents Club’ in South Kensington in July. “The idea of coming to stay somewhere where you also have exclusive club facilities is immensely motivating and interesting,” founder and co-owner Naomi Heaton tells me. The club is set across 11 Victorian townhouses and has over 200 fully fitted apartments (known as Club Flats) which are available for both short- and long-stay guests. It also has an all-day street café, a cocktail bar and a wellness area. The idea was inspired by Heaton's experience in the property world, where she noticed a growing interest in long-stay hotels. “The original concept was to blur the lines and smash everything together so that we provided a sense of apartment-style living with access to hotel services and also a private club facility.” The Other House is also highly modern, with an app that allows guests to check-in, access the room, book services, and even check how much energy the property →



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PRIVATE CLUBS



is consuming. "Luxury is being in control," Heaton adds.

Another new arrival in the English capital is The Twenty Two, located in a Grade II-listed Edwardian building on Grosvenor Square in Mayfair. The property combines a 31-room boutique hotel, inspired by 18th century classical French interiors, with a members club across the ground and lower ground floor.

Recovery time

As with the rest of the hospitality industry, the members club sector was hit hard by the pandemic. Fewer people were travelling, meetings and events pivoted to virtual formats, and the public was advised to reduce social contacts rather than grow them – a huge setback for an industry reliant on the draw of networking.

To survive, many members clubs transitioned to virtual benefits to retain annual dues, allowed members

to freeze memberships or promised them credit to spend once the clubs reopened.

Clubs under development also had a turbulent time. "From a construction point of view, it has been a tumultuous two years. Covid had a significant impact on the cost of materials, shortage of labour and delivery times. Timelines are also never reliable now," says Heaton. The Aster also had its opening delayed by a few months due to supply chain issues. "I think it's something we will all have to live with for the next year at least, coupled with expenses increasing as a result," says a spokesperson, adding that staffing remains a challenge.

That said, now that we have entered the post-pandemic era, the demand is arguably greater than ever for

ABOVE LEFT:
An artist's rendering of The Core Club's new location on Fifth Avenue, New York
ABOVE RIGHT:
An artist's rendering of the speakeasy at The Core Club, New York
BELOW LEFT:
The lobby at The Twenty Two, London
BELOW RIGHT:
A room at The Twenty Two, London

members clubs. For those that can afford it, it's a luxurious way to re-enter the social and working world, and rebuild connections in the wake of the pandemic. The clubs offer a retreat from a monotonous home office and an opportunity to socialise again in a safe, private, and professional setting – one that has a home-away-from-home feeling.

"Our focus on experiences, slow travel and tech have become more apposite now than when we were delivering the concept. The idea of a club that is multi-purpose is really taking off," explains Heaton.

The Other House is also addressing the exodus from city centres and the rise in remote working, marketing itself as a sort of pied-à-terre – hence the brand's name. Guests can rely on the club to store their belongings if they leave for a trip, and the club won't lose out on revenue as it can re-market the flat. Some 45 per cent of its members will be transient, staying for approximately 14 days, with a further 25 per cent staying for two weeks to three months and the remaining 30 per cent for three months or longer. "That will change the atmosphere completely of The Other House. When I go into a hotel, it feels like a revolving door. We want a more welcoming environment."

Country clubs such as Gleneagles in Scotland's Perth have also created a kind of pied-à-terre in the city →

A members club is a luxurious way to re-enter the working world and rebuild connections



MOSIMANN'S CLUB

Set in a striking converted 19th century church in the heart of Belgravia, Mosimann's is one of the world's most prestigious dining clubs.

A passion for excellence runs through every element of the experience and in this home away from home members from all over the world receive a warm, personal welcome and tailored service. The menu focuses on cuisine naturelle and, with a sharp eye on seasonality and sustainability, the chefs produce the freshest and most refined dishes.

The stunning interior architecture at Mosimann's lends itself perfectly to a club atmosphere, with the Balcony Bar on the mezzanine level overlooking the main dining restaurant and acting as a gateway to the seven private dining rooms, which are also available for non-members to hire.

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centre, with the golfing retreat's first boutique hotel in Edinburgh. The 33-room Gleneagles Townhouse is in the city's former Bank of Scotland on St Andrew Square and includes a members club with exclusive spaces such as a lounge with all-day dining, a snug and sitting rooms with a terrace and help-yourself pantry, and a wellness space and gym located in the former vault.

"Gleneagles is approaching its centenary in 2024. We had not [yet] taken it further than Perthshire but it's the right time to take the brand a bit further. A lot of customers use Edinburgh for international travel," says Conor O'Leary, managing director at The Gleneagles Hotel. The country estate benefited from the surge in staycations during the pandemic, owing to its outdoor space and ability to navigate restrictions. "We had a good regular base and picked up a lot of new guests. There's been a great opportunity to showcase to many new guests and talk to them about the Edinburgh property," adds O'Leary. It helps that members of Gleneagles Townhouse are offered a 30 per cent discount on rooms at the country estate.

International reach

For those clubs just starting out, the Soho House brand may be a form of inspiration. Since its debut on London's Greek Street in 1995, it has expanded to 35 outposts globally, and attracts trend-setters and digital nomads with its rooftop pools, screening rooms and celebrity events. Parent company Membership Collective Group (MCG), which also owns The Ned in London and New York, reported that the total number of members across its brands reached 171,927 in the first quarter of the year, a 44.3 per cent increase year-over-year, with a waiting list of 79,000 – an all-time high. Importantly, the retention rates have returned to pre-Covid levels.

One of the main benefits of membership for business travellers

'Our community is from all over the world. Members can conduct the business of their lives at Core'

is the reciprocal advantages when you travel abroad. Many clubs either have partnerships with international clubs, allowing members to use a private space rather than working from cramped hotel rooms, or their very own outposts abroad.

The Core Club is a good example of both the former and latter. While it currently only has one site in New York, members have access to a network of nine partner clubs around the world for up to three visits per year, which include Home House and the Arts Club in London.

The brand is also undergoing an expansion driven by its international membership. "We are celebrating internationalism. Our community is from all over the world," says Jennie Enterprise, the club's founder and chairman whose last name is a sign of her ambition.

The original club will move into a new site this month in New York's former Coca Cola building, followed by a Milan palazzo venue in December, and a club within the Transamerica Pyramid building in San Francisco in 2023. Each of these will also have accommodation given the international make-up of its members. Core will also move into markets including London, Paris, Miami, Madrid, Lisbon and Amsterdam in the future. "Members can really conduct the business of their lives at Core," summarises Enterprise.

The Aster also has partnerships with nine clubs around the world in locations such as Toronto, Reykjavik and Barcelona, with several more partnerships pending in cities including London, New York and Singapore. Members receive a discount of 30 per cent at other

WHAT IT COSTS Core

Membership: US\$15,000 annually
Joining fee: US\$15,000
Concessions: US\$18,000 for a couple.

Gleneagles Townhouse

Membership: £2,200 annually
Joining fee: £350
Concessions: Half price for those under the age of 33.

Soho House

Membership: £2,000-£2,500 annually in the UK for the 'Every House' membership
Joining fee: £500 in London, Brighton and Babington House

Concessions: Under 27 membership costs £950-£1,150 with a £300 joining fee in certain locations.

The Aster

Membership: US\$3,600 annually
Joining fee: None
Concession: None

The Other House

Membership: £1,500 annually
Joining fee: £350
Concession: None

The Twenty Two

Membership: £1,500 annually
Joining fee: £500-£1,000
Concession: Half-price for those aged 32 and under, no joining fee.

BELOW LEFT:
The screening room at The Aster, Los Angeles
BELOW RIGHT:
The pool at The Aster, Los Angeles
BOTTOM:
A suite at The Aster, Los Angeles



TOP:
The Note Burning Room at Gleneagles Townhouse
ABOVE:
The library at The Ned NoMad, New York

Salt Hotels, and the brand says it wants to grow its portfolio, though no locations have been named yet.

Meanwhile, The Other House is set to open a club in Covent Garden, followed by further properties in central London. "London is a fantastic global destination and if you develop the brand here then you have the springboard to move elsewhere. We are looking at destinations where we would attract a leisure traveller and also a business traveller," says Heaton who expects the brand to launch in various European cities as well as New York, Singapore, India and the Middle East, offering its members preferential access when they eventually open.

MCG's rapidly expanding Soho House, meanwhile, is on track to open nine venues this year, including recent openings in Nashville, Brighton and Los Angeles, followed by eight to ten annually from 2023 onwards – its aim is to beat its previous membership goal by 25 per cent this year.

Critical criteria

The trouble is how does the average Joe, or Joanne, become a member? In the past members clubs have been about status, privilege, and contacts. "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members," goes the famous Groucho Marx saying, epitomising the appeal of exclusivity in these clubs. Memberships are limited and the vetting process is robust.

When quizzed on membership criteria, exclusive clubs invariably give an inclusive answer – something along the lines of accepting applicants from a variety of backgrounds who share their values. The high fees, however, may price out many of these individuals, though a number of clubs offer concessions for younger members – see box above left.

Some clubs also scout for members, proactively searching for people who are doing impressive things in the world. Our advice? Make sure your CV is cracking and we'll see you there – even if we're plus ones. **BT**