

The bar at Generator Hamburg



# The new **DESIGNER** HOSTELS

*In search of high design on a low budget, Alison Taylor finds you can get much more than you pay for*

## PALAZZOS FOR PAUPERS

My Venetian home, a 19th century palazzo, is behind me as I sit on the waterfront, legs dangling above the shimmering surface, Aperol spritz in hand, St Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace across the canal through the orange-blue haze of the sky. I'm daydreaming and, I'll admit it, drinking away my hangover from last night's party - a decadent gathering in the gentleman's club-style lobby, presided over by Kitsuné DJs and brimming with beautiful people dancing, drinking and debauching.

I should probably mention at this point that the palazzo is actually a youth hostel, and I'm paying £15 a night.

When I first arrived at the Generator hostel on Giudecca, the chi-chi island across the water from Piazza San Marco, on which Elton John owns a home, I was sitting in said lobby (on a velvet chair) eating a prosciutto panini and checking my email (on free Wi-Fi), when a lost-looking girl heaved her backpack through the bronze-and-glass doors and asked:

Right: The Venetian skyline. Left: A room at U Hostel, Madrid



The chill-out area at Generator Copenhagen. Left: U Hostel, Madrid



Generator Venice. Left: Parque Juan Carlos I, Madrid



*'Hostels have become so good, you have to check the map to make sure you're in the right place'*

'Can you help me, please? Do you know where the hostel is?'

Now, this exchange sounds like it could be a made-up marketing managers dream (did a Generator executive plant her there?), but it conveniently sums up what's going on with this, Venice's first upmarket hostel, and with budget accommodation in general: it's so good, you have to check the map to make sure you're in the right place.

'If Soho House did hostels, they would look like this,' says my friend Sam, who also witnessed *The Incident Of The Lost Girl In The Lobby*. 'You get boutique standards at hostel prices. It's a redefinition of the term hostel.'

He's right. Venice is one of eight properties in the Generator

group, which also includes a Hamburg skyscraper where The Beatles recorded one of their first songs, a former Philippe Starck bolthole in Copenhagen and a converted police station in London (there are also similarly intriguing properties in Barcelona, Berlin and Dublin, with Paris and Rome coming soon). 'The definition of luxury has changed,' explains Josh Wyatt, a partner at Patron Capital, the company that took over - and started revamping - Generator a few years ago. 'Whether you're spending £10 or £10,000, it's about having something unique. What we're trying to do, and what I'm passionate about, is creating the memory - that indelible burn on the brain.'

### HOSTELS REDEFINED

An indelible burn on the brain without burning a hole in your palazzo-pants pocket? It is possible. Take PLUS Hostel in Florence, one of many so-called 'luxury hostels' on travel site HostelBookers (hostelbookers.com). It's got an outdoor pool, a restaurant and a panoramic terrace bar; while Madrid's stylish U Hostel features a cinema room. As a HostelBookers representative puts it: 'Hostels today offer double rooms with en-suite bathrooms, as well as dorms, and travellers can spend their time amid cool decor, on roof terraces, in Jacuzzis and in extravagant lounges.'

Rooftop pool? Terrace bar? Say *whaaaat*? When I InterRailed around Europe after my first year at university in 2001, none of the hostels could have been described as stylish (well, unless prison chic is your thing). But being cheap is not enough any more. 'Everyone is more discerning now,' says Wyatt. 'You might have been able to get away with building something cheap and boring in the past, but you can't now. People are more design savvy - they know what they like and then they go on social media and tell others.'

It's true. There's no way I would have taken a photo of myself in the concrete block where I stayed in Prague in the early Noughties. But Generator Venice? With its vintage fireplace (sourced in Verona), hipster wallpaper (from

The pool at  
the Freehand,  
Miami



*'Buildings must have a DNA – it can be ugly or beautiful, but it has to have soul'*

Flavor Paper in Brooklyn), and giant apothecary's desk (recovered from Milan)? I'd Instagram it to death. 'Travel is the most shared experience on the internet,' says Alasdair Snow, founder of Triptease (triptease.com), a slick online platform that lets users create and share visual storyboards of their travels. 'People share stories about trips they've loved, which means places with a cool design spin, or off-the-beaten-track experiences.'

So it makes sense, in this rampant social-media age, that hostels are upping their visual and experiential game. Design-led Istanbul hostel chain #bunk even has a hashtag in front of its name. Its 32-bed property in the bohemian district of Beyoglu features mosque-style ceilings and marble bathrooms; while another, much larger #bunk hostel in the city centre has 170 beds, a pizzeria, a bar and a sundeck.

#### LOCATION, LOCATION

As well as price and design, the narrative behind a property is key in this new movement. 'We look for provenance in a building, something that allows us to tell a story or history of the city to our guests,' says Wyatt. 'To offer that means we must have special buildings with a DNA. That DNA can be ugly or beautiful, but it has to have soul and it must be unique.' He refers to their Dublin hostel, which used to be an Irish folk dancing hall: 'The space was incredible – it gave us a huge atrium where we could preserve the original stone walls, then add street art to give it an urban twist.'

In the US, there isn't an equivalent chain to Generator (luckily, Generator has plans for properties in New York, Washington and Miami in the next few years), but there are a few

gems. The Freehand in Miami is your budget Delano – think 1930s art-deco architecture, outdoor pool, tropical courtyard and eclectic, colourful interiors from the designers behind Ace Hotel New York. Then there's the 'pod' concept, like Pod 39 in midtown Manhattan, which houses 366 beds in stand-alone capsule rooms. Sleepbox is a similar concept in Moscow, Russia.

#### CLOSER TO HOME

In the UK, there has also been a steady rise in cool budget stays, such as London's K West Hotel & Spa and Hoxton Hotel, The Grassmarket Hotel in Edinburgh, and small chains such as The Nadler (formerly Base2stay). Meanwhile, YHA – a brand you may associate with chilly school trips and rickety bunk beds – has invested over £22 million into renovating its properties over the past three years (and seen a 20 per cent increase in online bookings). There are some strikingly beautiful places to stay, from Jane Austen-style manor houses to lighthouses and remote coastal hideaways.

'We have a lot of heritage properties – it's what sets us apart,' says Anna Williams, who heads the YHA's investment programme. The refurbishments have focused on creating private en-suite rooms, restaurants and – crucially – licensed bars. Some restaurants, like Hemmingford's at YHA



Above: A room at the Freehand. Right and below: #bunk Beyoglu



Below: Generator Berlin Mitte



Stratford-upon-Avon and Lakeside at YHA Ambleside, have non-residents flocking in for a table, too. 'There can be few restaurants that have such a stunning view of Lake Windermere,' says Williams of Lakeside. 'It is only about 20 feet from the water's edge.' YHA Berwick also has an on-site art gallery, which recently housed a Lowry exhibition. Gone are the days of lights out at 10pm and mucking in with the chores.

At the heart of all this is a new, more discerning customer looking to be inspired when they go away, even if on a budget. Hostels are great for group trips (clubbing in Berlin, anyone?), hen dos (take over a castle for a weekend!) and even honeymoons - YHA offers bridal suites with roll-top baths and four-poster beds. As a result, hostels are attracting a different, wider-ranging customer base beyond the 19 to 25-year-old backpackers.

Back in Venice, my modern-rustic private room has crisp white sheets, an en suite with one of the best showers I've ever had, and a panoramic view of the city in all its glory. Soon I'll be jumping into a speedboat-style water taxi to get to the airport. If that's not travelling in style, then I don't know what is.

## OUR PICK OF THE HIP HOSTELS

### GENERATOR

This chain has as a growing portfolio of hostels. Dorm beds start from £14, doubles from £35.50; free Wi-Fi. Breakfast costs £3.70 per day. There is no minimum-stay policy. [generatorhostels.com](http://generatorhostels.com); @GeneratorHostel

### YHA

With a huge range of UK hostels, YHA offers free Wi-Fi for members where available, and breakfast is a standard £4.99 (you can also use the self-catering kitchens). There is no minimum-stay policy. [yha.org.uk](http://yha.org.uk); @YHAOfficial

### YHA Berwick

Dewar's Lane Granary, Dewar's Lane, Berwick-upon-Tweed; 0845 371 9676; [yha.org.uk/hostel/berwick](http://yha.org.uk/hostel/berwick). Dorm beds from £13, doubles from £30 (en suite).

### YHA Stratford-upon-Avon

Hemmingford House, Alveston, Stratford-upon-Avon; 0845 371 9661; [yha.org.uk/hostel/stratford-upon-avon](http://yha.org.uk/hostel/stratford-upon-avon). Dorm beds from £15, double rooms from £25 (en suite).

### HOSTELBOOKERS

This booking site features hundreds of hostels worldwide, priced from around £5pp per night. Its 'inspiration' lists have categories such as unusual hotels or luxury hostels. [hostelbookers.com](http://hostelbookers.com); @HostelBookers

### #BUNK

Istanbul chain with two properties - #bunk Beyoglu, with 20th century-meets-Ottoman design, and the modern #bunk Taksim. Dorm beds from £21, doubles from £67. [bunkhostels.com](http://bunkhostels.com); @Bunkhostels



From top: The library at U Hostel, Madrid; the pool at PLUS Florence



The patio at the Freehand, Miami. Left: Tattva Design Hostel, Porto



## BEST OF THE REST

### PLUS Florence, Italy

Centrally located with an outdoor pool and terrace bar. 15 Via Santa Caterina D'Alessandria; +39 055 628 6347; [plushostels.com](http://plushostels.com). Dorm beds from £13, doubles from £70 (en suite); free Wi-Fi.

### U Hostel, Madrid

This new city-centre hostel has a cinema, laundry and large rooftop terrace. 22 Calle Sagasta; +34 91 445 0300; [uhostels.com](http://uhostels.com). Dorm beds from £12.75, doubles from £50 (en suite); free Wi-Fi.

### Tattva Design Hostel, Porto

Set in a world heritage building in the city's design quarter, some rooms have en-suite baths. Rua do Cativo 26-28; +351 220 944 622; [tattvadesignhostel.com](http://tattvadesignhostel.com). Dorm beds from £8.40, doubles from £40; free Wi-Fi.

### Pod 39, New York

A short walk from Grand Central Station, Pod has 366 capsule rooms with en suites and flat-screen TVs. The rooftop bar, 17 storeys up, has amazing views. 145 E. 39th Street; +1 212 865 5700; [thepodhotel.com](http://thepodhotel.com). Doubles from £110.

### Freehand, Miami

Get your art-deco fix at this super-cool hostel, with its pool, vegetable garden and art classes. 2727 Indian Creek Drive, Miami Beach; +1 305 531 2727; [thefreehand.com](http://thefreehand.com). Dorm beds from £26, doubles from £89.

### Sleepbox, Moscow

What it says on the tin - a bed in a box with free Wi-Fi. Some rooms have en-suite showers. 1-ya Tverskaya-Yamskaya St 27; +7 495 989 41 04; [sleepbox-hotel.ru/en](http://sleepbox-hotel.ru/en). Doubles from around £78.



YHA Stratford-upon-Avon

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For more cool budget beds.  
[see-elleuk.com/travel](http://see-elleuk.com/travel)