

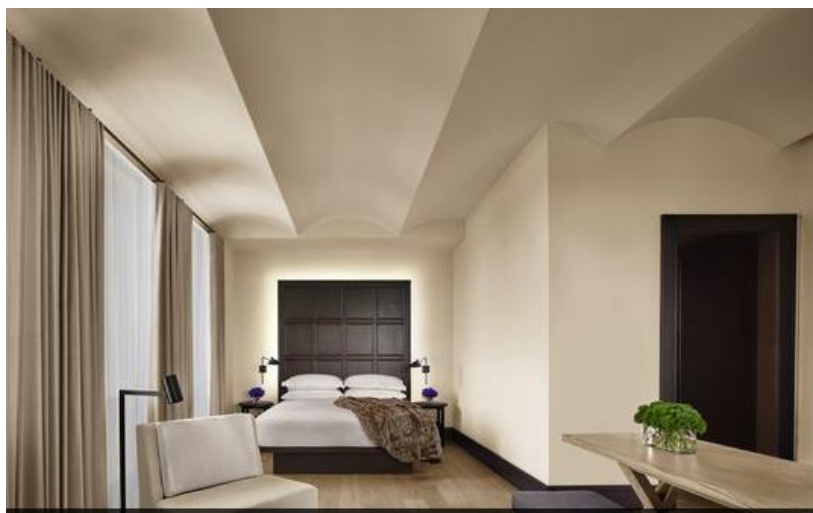
New hotel brands, alliances a boon for business travelers

 Nancy Trejos, USA TODAY 6 p.m. EDT May 3, 2015

When Ian Schrager, the pioneer of boutique hotels, and Marriott International, the pioneer of big-box hotels, joined forces to create a new luxury lifestyle brand, industry insiders called it an odd coupling.

Nine years later, the hospitality giants are on the verge of opening the fourth EDITION hotel, this one in the landmark Clock Tower building overlooking Madison Square Park in New York City. Nearly 20 more are on the way.

The EDITION New York City's debut on May 12 is the latest example of Marriott shedding its reputation as a creature of habit. In recent years, the Bethesda, Md.-based hotel company has introduced new brands that appeal to travelers looking for a more unique hotel experience.



"It's a company that's out there doing a lot of things and a lot of initiatives, and not resting on its laurels," Schrager says.

The largest hotel chains in the world have had to reinvent themselves to appeal to modern-day travelers who want to enjoy the perks of loyalty programs but don't want to stay at a cookie-cutter chain hotel.

They've done so by creating collections of independent hotels, acquiring boutique brands or creating their own lifestyle brands. Starwood recently introduced Tribute Portfolio, a collection

of four-star hotels. Hilton last year announced it would create the Curio collection and introduced Canopy.

InterContinental Hotels Group bought the Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants boutique brand. Hyatt unveiled Centric. Along with EDITION, Marriott has created MOXY and imported AC Hotels from Spain.

"These are brands that I think can be quite disruptive in their space because they are appealing to these young and young-at-heart travelers today who are looking for something quite fresh," says Tina Edmundson, Marriott's global officer for luxury and lifestyle brands.

Marriott was also an early proponent of the independent hotel with its creation in 2010 of the Autograph Collection, which now has more than 81 properties. Soon, the historic Mayflower Hotel, an institution in Washington, D.C., for nearly 90 years, will join the collection, after undergoing a \$20 million renovation.

Edmundson says the Mayflower, which has been part of Marriott's Renaissance brand, is a better fit for the Autograph Collection.

"Mayflower is so well known in the local market," she says. "That's really what Autograph is. Autograph is not a brand. It's a collection of local brands that are known in the local market."

Other notable independent hotels in the collection are the hip Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas and the legendary Algonquin in New York City.

"The business traveler now has more property choices that feel indigenously rooted to any given local culture with the rise of independent hotel collections — and to top it off, that traveler can also earn loyalty status in an arena they previously could not," says Gray Shealy, executive director of Georgetown University's master's in hospitality management program.

Independent hotels benefit from joining collections because they gain access to a large company's reservations systems and millions of loyalty program members without giving up their branding. They also don't have to follow as many rules as a branded Hilton or Hyatt has to.

"You're seeing the traveler and the consumer really like the independent hotel experience," says Lindsey Ueberroth, president and CEO of Preferred Hotels and Resorts, a collection of independent hotels which has more than doubled in size to about 650 since 2004. "Years ago there was a lot of comfort to stay in a chain and now there's a desire to stay somewhere unique."

Schrager says he doesn't think creating his new brand under the Marriott flag compromises the uniqueness of it. Each hotel — so far there are properties in Istanbul, Miami, and London — has a unique design and feel, he says. Eventually, he hopes the number of EDITION hotels to reach at least 100.

"The work hasn't suffered despite the volume," he says.

A recent tour of the Madison Square Park property showed that EDITION has little in common with most Marriott hotels. The lobby décor is simple, but the restaurant, located on the second floor, has the feel of a 1920s gentlemen's club with dark wood paneling and tall ceilings.

The walls are adorned with a collection of nearly 500 photographs of American artists, musicians and other icons displayed in French baroque gold leaf frames. Schrager picked each photograph himself.

The rooms have tall ceilings and large windows, unusual for New York City hotels.

Schrager welcomes the changing tastes: "The more luxurious a hotel was, the more traditional in its look and feel it had to be. That's what we've all become accustomed to seeing. ... I kind of see the same opportunity in the luxury space that I saw in the boutique, lifestyle space."