

NEW CLASSICS

THE PURSUIT OF PRIVACY

ESCAPE ARTISTRY

What do you do when exclusivity becomes commonplace? Only the lonely know

There's a woman in tears in Jim Lafferty's office at the San Jose Jet Center, which caters to private Silicon Valley planes. A desk agent, she has cracked under the pressure. "I have eighty-five airplanes here," says Lafferty, a part owner of the center, "and sixty-seven people on a waiting list. They're buying planes faster than we can figure out where to put them."

A new obsession has gripped the upper echelons of travelers. The desire for privacy, once fulfillable for only the elite few, has become the craving of the crowd. From velvet rope clothing stores like London's Voyage (where you need a VIP card to gain entry) to nightclubs with unlisted phone numbers, there has never been a better moment to, as Greta Garbo supposedly said, "want to be alone."

BY MICHAEL GROSS

Jetting away from everything at Boston City, a Lafferty's agent gets an island in the Bahamas.



A private affair: How about a rock garden at Begawan Gita Estate, a Bali resort with just five villas for rent, Mucka Cay from above, or a Mucka trail.



We're not talking JFK, sneaking out of the Carlyle Hotel through the kitchen, either. The new options are as luxurious as they are limitless. Rent a top-of-the-line Gulfstream V for \$3,000 an hour (or settle for a G-III for a mere \$1,000). Fly to Europe, pick up your own private Swiss-Express train (\$150,000), and wind your way to a hotel like the Splendido in Portofino, Italy, which you can take over entirely, turning it into a personal playground, for \$12,750 a night. Unless you'd prefer a private five-bedroom, 8,000-square-foot, 15,010-a-night villa at Bali's Begawan Gita Estate, which comes with full hotel services. Or the late Aristotle Onassis's yacht Christina O, available for private charter at \$70,000 a day. Or a Scottish castle. Or an island of your own.

In New York City, the lounge Boulevard 5 is so secret that it has an unlisted phone number. Sixty to Manhattan's cool club Lot 60, its name comes from one of the famous hideaways at the Beverly Hills Hotel, rare antecedents of today's craze for privacy. How does one get in? "Try charming the doorman," suggests proprietor Amy Sacco. In other words, don't get your hopes up.

Venture capitalist Heidi Reizen doesn't think she's self-indulgent, even though she and her surgeon husband will, infrequently, take over Necker Island, Richard Branson's private retreat in the British Virgin Islands, for about \$20,000 a night. "You try to have perspective," she says. "So you live an ordinary life and then one day you decide to take twenty-four friends to the Caribbean."

The phenomenon isn't limited to venture capitalists. "High-profile types are inundated with people who want to be their friends," says John J. Moll, owner of Mucka Cay in Exuma—where Faith Hill hides out. "Now it has multiplied a thousandfold because of the media. A decade ago, celebrities could hide in foreign countries. They can't do that anymore—they end up in *Star* magazine." Where hot politics read all about it. And want what Faith has. Like Mucka Cay, which sleeps 10 and is yours, complete with staff, food, and wine, for a cool \$125,000 a week.

The false conviviality of five years ago, when communal tables were being installed at chic hotels and restaurants, has given way to pseudo-exclusivity (guilt, of course, because everybody's doing it). The Chateau Marmont and the Standard in West Hollywood, and the Mercer in New York's SoHo, are three hotels known for having bottled the lightning of travel trendiness. But their owner, Andre Balazs, worries that the buzz machine that sustained them may be busted beyond repair. "Things used to be hot because only a few knew," he says. "The ones who used to define cool are running from it." Running where? Some, at least, are going to Balazs's latest creation, Sub Mercer, a club in the basement below the Mercer Hotel that's off-limits without an invitation—because the hotel's restaurant, Mercer Kitchen, is too public. "Everything has become accessible, so the quest for inaccessibility

is brightened," Balazs says with a sigh. "The truly exclusive have moved to exclusion."

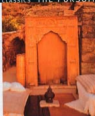
Expect things to get worse. "It's an outcome of big-city life, high stress, and incredible discretionary income," says Alanair Morrison, who runs Purdue University's Tourism & Hospitality Research Center. "We have more means of communication, and that's increased our desire to escape, to seek seclusion."

It's a self-centered baby boomer thing too, Morrison says. Aging boomers at the peak of their earning years "want their own vacations." Raised to believe they're special, accustomed to instant gratification from infancy to Internet, the children of Dr. Spock aren't satisfied by just any vacation. "They're looking for the perfect trip," says Melissa Toms, North American marketing director for Orient-Express Hotels.

This is business as usual for Edward Manqis, whose International Chapters agency owns villas in Europe, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Mauritius. Weekly rates range from \$4,000 to \$10,000 for "the use of place a pop star goes to," Manqis says. Villas have siphoned off some of the crowd that once patronized luxury hotels. Clever hoteliers are responding by building villas of their own—like the opulent new \$4,000-per-night two-bedroom hideaways occupied by the most discerning guests at the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan. This is giving way to a new breed of over-the-top private-island resorts like Belair's Cayo Espanto, a \$7,500-a-night jewel box with five villas. "There's such an intrigue to getting out of your life and going somewhere private," says owner Jeff Gross.

Orient-Express has turned the madness into a product—complete with a glossy brochure. Its Ultimate Takeover program was launched last year after the company noted an increased demand for "absolutely quintessential, truly exclusive experiences," Toms says. The Takeover—in which a single customer buys out an entire property—appeals to the rich, the celebrated, and the power elite. This spring, for instance, a tycoon took over La Samana on St. Martin for a party. Seventy guests had full run of the 87-room resort for five nights. The cost? About \$105,000—including the extra the host laid on, like his own silver and daily phonedials of fresh flowers.

Heightened privacy is the special formula behind Italy's Mesasera, a restored village on Pantelleria, an island off Sicily. Its owner, photographer and fashion connoisseur Fabrizio Ferri, calls it "the place where people with nothing to hide can hide." And he rents its 12 traditional stone cottages, which sit in three little clusters on the large property, only to friends, or to friends of friends like Madonna, Sting, Gérard Depardieu, and Carlo Bonasetti. "But you can rent one"—for prices ranging from \$4,500 to \$24,000-per-week, Ferri says—"if you heard about it from the right people, if we like you." Ferri will also ask, "Why do you want to come?" Better predictor than Carlo's intuition.



A bedroom in Mesasera, above, an Italian village for rent, above; Becker Island, all yours for only \$24,000 a day.



ADDRESS BOOK

Hotel Splendide & Splendide Mare at Viale Arona, Portofino, Italy; 800/323-6800 or 39-02-8300-0884; doubles from \$616.

Bogwan Gin Estate Blvd., 800/400-232-2323 or 62-3-6307-8888; doubles from \$475.

Chateau D 200-4700-8888; \$300,000 per night.

Bungalow B 111 W. 27th St., New York.

Beverly Hills Hotel 9641 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles; 800/283-8889 or 310/274-2700; doubles from \$340.

Becker Island Estate High Island; 800/507-2433 or

203/802-2216; from \$25,000 per night.

Becker Cay Estate, Bahamas; 202/869-2000 or 302/869-8800;

from \$20,000 per night.

Chateau Rosewood 4200 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood;

800/337-8239 or 310/998-2000; doubles from \$379.

The Standard 6300 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood;

310/856-2000; doubles from \$279.

Mesaia Hotel 127 Mercer St., New York; 800/368-6000 or

212/948-6000; doubles from \$470.

International Chapters 22-202/702-0200; villas from \$4,500 per week.

Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan Blvd., Gilimanu; 800/337-3447 or

62-3-6307-2323; doubles from \$475.

Hillside Mesasera 228 Rue de Rome, Paris; 800/323-6800 or

33-1-42-28-40-00; doubles from \$200.

Cayo Espanto Belize; 866/666-2476 or 502/323-8222; doubles from \$500.

Orient-Express Ultimate Takeover 800-639-2639.

La Samana St. Martin; 800/323-6800 or 302/869-8800;

doubles from \$376.

Bogwan Gin Peninsula, Italy; 39-02-8300-0884; from \$2,700 per week.