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# These 9 innovative hotel chains are the ones to watch as the travel industry makes its big comeback, experts say

Madeline Stone Apr 26, 2021, 5:53 AM



The Palihouse Santa Barbara, part of the Palisociety chain. Courtesy of Palisociety

- **The hospitality industry is ready for a comeback after a difficult year.**

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- **Chains that are relying on contactless tech, and strong branding could lead the way in the recovery.**

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- **Hospitality experts say these nine brands stand out for their innovative strategies.**

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After enduring its [worst year on record](#), the hospitality industry is eager to make a comeback.

According to [STR](#), 2020 brought the steepest declines in occupancy, average daily rate, and revenue per available room that the industry ever reported.

Many hotels are now introducing ways of connecting with travelers, rolling out contactless technology, and reimagining their amenity

Insider polled three hospitality experts about the chains that could lead the way in innovation as the industry emerges from the pandemic. They said these hotel chains were on the cutting edge of hospitality trends, whether that means leaning into tech, unique amenity offerings, or having developed top-of-the-line food-and-beverage programs.

"The successful and innovative brands are the ones where the guest really doesn't feel or really see much of a change, but the experience has just become so compelling and strong," Cara Federici, the CEO and founder of the [Madison Melle Agency](#), a hospitality consultancy, told Insider. "That's what makes a brand innovative."

The chains listed include boutique hotel businesses, as well as smaller brands within major hotel conglomerates.

## Life House



**Life House, Nantucket, opened in August.** [Life House Hotels](#)

[Life House](#) is a collection of four hotels in Miami, Denver, and Nantucket, Massachusetts, with more locations on the way in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Brooklyn, New York; and Bali, its first outside the US.

The company has raised more than \$40 million in venture-capital funding from investors including Thayer Ventures, Tiger Global, Comcast Ventures, and the actor Ashton Kutcher.

In addition to its hotel properties, which have locally inspired design touches and are very Instagrammable, Life House operates a white-label hotel-management program meant to help property owners operate their businesses more seamlessly. Its tech offerings include machine-learning-led pricing software and an app for contactless check-ins, mobile keys, and social networking.

The white-label tech is now being used by Life House to manage a new [Kayak-branded and -leased hotel](#) in Miami.

"They have some of the best apps and uses of technology, as far as the experience," Jukka Laitamaki, a clinical professor at the NYU School of Professional Studies Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality, told Insider.

## Wylder Hotels



Travelers can stay in vintage trailers at Wylder Hotel Hope Valley. Ren Fuller

Wylder Hotels is a small chain geared toward outdoor adventurers. It has two locations — one in Hope Valley, California, and the other on Maryland's Tilghman Island.

The Hope Valley location has a variety of accommodations beyond the traditional hotel room, including yurts, cabins, and vintage Spartan trailers. The Tilghman Island location is on Chesapeake Bay in a building that was erected as a boarding house in 1898. It offers travelers easy access to activities like kayaking, canoeing, biking, fishing, and cruising.

Federici said Wylder's focus on outdoor activities and flexible accommodations positioned it well in a time when many are looking for adventures closer to home.

"It really allows for the traveler to kind of choose their own adventure," she said. "I think that's really special, especially as we talk about post-COVID travel and the future of travel and travel experiences in general."

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## CitizenM



**CitizenM has a hotel in Boston.** Angela Rowlings/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald via Getty Images

CitizenM is a Netherlands-based hotel chain that has branched out of Europe and Asia to open locations in Boston, New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC.

Laitamaki said the hotel company was one of the first in the select-service category to understand the importance of creating appealing social spaces. Its lobbies feature bars and restaurants that the company calls CanteenM, as well as stylish common areas called living rooms.

By moving the living spaces that would typically be inside a guest room to the common areas, CitizenM can create more rooms per floor than a typical hotel, while encouraging guests to mingle. CitizenM was also a pioneer in contactless check-ins, a service that many other chains are now rolling out during the pandemic.

"There's no traditional check-in desk," Laitamaki said. "There's a kiosk and these ambassadors that help people."

## Palisociety



**The Palihouse Santa Barbara.** Courtesy of Palisociety

Palisociety is a hotel chain with 10 locations in Los Angeles; Santa Barbara, California; San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Seattle; and Miami Beach, Florida. It also just acquired the Arrive hotel brand, which has locations in East Austin, Texas; Palm Springs, California; Memphis, Tennessee; and Wilmington, North Carolina, with more to come in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and New Orleans. The terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Each of Palisociety's properties has its own local flair, which Federici said was difficult to achieve as hotel businesses grow to more locations.

"Every time you go into one of their properties, you really feel like every decision was made with intention, everything from the type of dining-room table that they may have in one of their food-and-beverage outlets to the sheet or towel that you have in your room," Federici said. "A lot of hotels will try to do that, but when you have to do that at scale, it can be really challenging."

## Yotel



Yotel has a location in New York City. Noam Galai/Getty Images

Yotel has been growing steadily since it opened its first property at London's Gatwick Airport in 2007. It now has US hotels in Boston, Miami, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. It has 22 locations globally.

The chain has a distinctive space-age design. Laitamaki said the chain had also been innovative in its creation of multipurpose spaces and furniture, like with its SmartBed that can be converted from a couch to a flat double bed. The design additionally makes it easier for housekeepers to clean.

Laitamaki also pointed to the robot the hotel uses to handle luggage and the restaurants that can be converted into nightclubs as features that set Yotel apart as an innovative brand.

## Kimpton Hotels



An ocean-view room at the Kimpton Grand Cayman. Caroline Lupini

Part of InterContinental Hotels Group since 2014, Kimpton was one of the first boutique lifestyle hotel brands and has long been known for being cutting edge, said Amanda Belarmino, an assistant professor at the William F. Harrah College of Hospitality at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Kimpton hotels offer unique amenities like yoga mats in every room, free bike rentals, and a nightly wine hour.

Belarmino said Kimpton's acquisition by IHG for \$430 million helped its overall brand awareness because it was included in IHG's loyalty program, IHG Rewards Club. Leaning on established brand names can go a long way in building trust with consumers.

"Even if they want something unique, they still want to have confidence that the basics are taken care of. We see that over and over again," Belarmino said. "If it's something's innovative, they still have to get all of the basic things right. It needs to be clean and it needs to be safe."

## Virgin Hotels



Virgin Hotels Las Vegas opened at the end of March. Virgin Hotels

Virgin Hotels, created by Richard Branson's Virgin Group, operates properties in Dallas; Nashville, Tennessee; Chicago; and Las Vegas, the latter of which just opened on March 25. The chain is also set to open locations in New York, New Orleans, and Miami, as well as in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland.

Belarmino said the company's amenity offerings — dog beds in guest rooms, live-music venues, and Smeg fridges, for example — and Gen X-specific marketing campaigns made Virgin Hotels unique. In Las Vegas, dining options include restaurants from names that are well-known in the culinary world, including Nobu, Todd English's Olives, and Kris Yenbamroong's Night and Market.

Belarmino said the decision to partner with outside restaurants rather than develop its own food and beverage offerings was a trend that has been popular with Las Vegas casino resorts but that could take over more of the hospitality industry.

"You take people that are the best in the world at what they do, and you allow them to do it in your space. It's only going to help those partners," she said. "And that's something that I think we may see as we move forward — rather than having to worry about all the different aspects of what you're doing at a full-service hotel, that allows you something a little bit different."

## Hyatt House



A Hyatt House hotel in Emeryville, California. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The extended-stay category has suffered the least financially during the pandemic. According to STR, extended-stay hotels reported room revenue declines of 32.2% in 2020, compared with 49.4% for the industry overall.

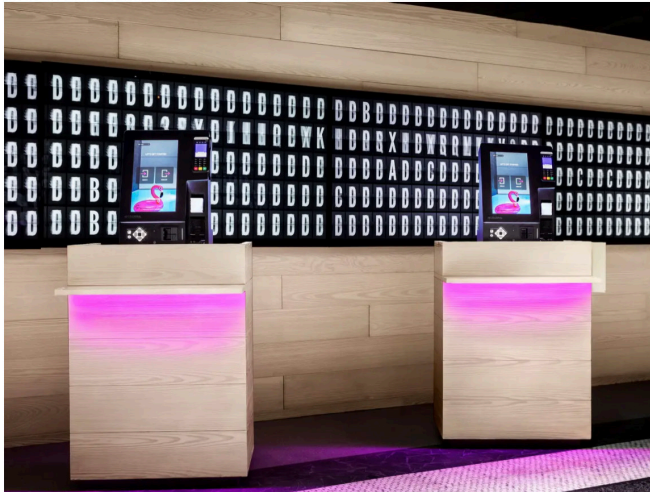
Essential workers traveling at the height of the pandemic needed places to stay for longer periods of time. Meanwhile, many newly remote workers took extended trips to vacation destinations and combined elements of leisure and business.

Laitamaki said he expected the extended-stay trend to persist for some time and that major players would likely adapt their brands to fit the trend. He added that Hyatt House ranked highly on J.D. Power's measures of customer satisfaction.

"Some people won't return to the office, but they may need a place that combines working, living, and leisure in an affordable, productive way," Laitamaki said.

Hyatt Houses have apartment-style layouts with separate living areas and fully equipped kitchens. They also have a selection of items that guests can borrow, like yoga mats, headphones, and blenders.

## Moxy Hotels



**Marriott is testing contactless kiosks at Moxy NYC Times Square.** Courtesy of Marriott International

Moxy is a millennial-focused hotel brand owned by Marriott with 74 locations globally, 21 of which are in the US. Its US locations are primarily in big cities including New York, Chicago, and Miami.

Laitamaki said Moxy was similar to CitizenM in that it prioritizes social communal spaces where consumers can hang out instead of in their rooms. Another similarity to CitizenM is that Moxy's hotels do not have a traditional check-in desk. Employees instead greet customers at a bar where they can grab their keys along with a complimentary cocktail.

The rooms themselves also have some notable design details, like motion-activated LED lights, walk-in showers, and pegs for hanging clothes on the wall.

[Marriott is piloting contactless check-in kiosks at Moxy NYC Times Square and Moxy Miami Beach](#), in addition to two other properties in its vast portfolio. The kiosks create key cards and use an antimicrobial technology that is built into the touch screen.

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