

Luxury hotels compete by offering exclusive beauty products

Hotel Bel-Air and others raise the fancy quotient in guest rooms and suites.

By Valli Herman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

September 28, 2008

WITH A harpist strumming gently in a garden gazebo, swans drifting across a pond and waiters circulating with gourmet hors d'oeuvres, the Hotel Bel-Air recently unveiled its newest bid to up the luxury quotient.

No, it wasn't some over-the-top innovation in bedding or an exotic turn in room service.

The fuss was about soap -- and shampoo, hair conditioner, shower gel and body lotion. The oft-overlooked little bottles in the bathroom are now at the center of the battle for the hearts, minds and well-moisturized complexions of luxury hotel guests. And landing a collection of exclusive bath and spa products has become the latest must-have coup among top hotels. Call it Soap Wars.

The five-star Hotel Bel-Air's launch party was for Halcyon blue, a relatively unknown Australian luxury brand of bath and body products that feature essential oils. In North America, the only place to lay hands on them is this hotel. Guest rooms are stocked with travel-size sets of the products, which also appear in full-sized sets that sell for \$115 in the gift shop (and show up as a perk in top-of-the-line rooms).

Across town in Pasadena, two days after the Bel-Air event, the Langham, Huntington Hotel & Spa held an elegant luncheon to launch its exclusive spa product, Ajne Rare & Precious, a custom-blended fragrance previously available in Los Angeles only in gift baskets destined for Oscar nominees.

"You can get candles anywhere. You can get oils anywhere," said Lisa Marie Potts, spa supervisor at the Langham. "We needed to get something special for a special property."

Exclusivity is today's prized commodity, and even previously well-regarded body product lines, such as Molton Brown and Crabtree & Evelyn, no longer deliver the aura that helps differentiate luxury hotels.

"Today's traveler is very sophisticated," said Paul Tchen, former general manager of the Peninsula Beverly Hills who's now based in Shanghai. "Guests expect a premier experience at every point of the stay."

Limits on liquids in carry-on baggage have forced air travelers to value anew the grooming supplies hotels provide. Offering a steady supply of high-quality bath products promotes goodwill and, hoteliers hope, loyalty.

Pearls and pamper

FOR BEAUTY companies, such partnerships are valuable opportunities to get a well-defined, upscale clientele to use -- not fleetingly sample -- their goods in a luxurious setting that bestows priceless associations.

Thus, when Carlo Mondavi and partner Josh LeVine were asked last year to develop their new anti-aging skin care collection, Davi, into amenities for the Peninsula Hotels luxury chain, they jumped at the chance.

"The biggest thing for us is having people try the products," said Mondavi, grandson of Napa Valley winemaker Robert Mondavi. "It allows us to put our products in front of a lot of great, discerning customers."

The effort was "extremely worthwhile," said Jan Wallace, chief executive of Davi Skin Inc.

The Davi name attracted a lot of notoriety and credibility, she said, and as a result, the company has drawn potential partners eager to develop spas or expand the product line, which features microencapsulated Meritage, a proprietary blend of grape extracts and plant-based antioxidants.

The W Hotels' partnership with Bliss Spas has helped to make bestsellers of Bliss beauty products. Next year, Bliss' newest scent, blood orange and white pepper, will launch as an exclusive set in W hotel rooms worldwide. Only hotel guests can get the new products in travel sizes.

A hotel partnership sometimes inspires companies to expand their lines. Davi and Bliss stretched beyond their skin-care specialty to create complementary hair-care products for the in-room sets.

Companies also must maintain their products' uniqueness to keep hotels and spas interested, said Benjamin Nissanoff, chief executive and co-founder of L.A.-based Me! Bath. His company counts on spas and hotels for 60% of sales, so when spa directors began asking for items distinct from the retail collections, he developed Me! Bath Spa, a new line of body-care products blended with higher concentrations of ingredients such as jojoba oil and vitamin C. Now it's available exclusively to his spa and hotel clients.

For beauty product junkies, the limited availability of refills for their new favorites shouldn't be a barrier: Most companies sell their offerings, in larger sizes, on websites or in hotel boutiques or spas.

"I once paid \$14 for parking at the W just to get my Bliss products at their spa," confessed a publicist for a rival product, who thus asked for anonymity.

And if you're in the group that actually checks in to the hotel, don't be surprised if one day soon, that mint on your pillow is replaced by samples of scented bath salts, moisturizer or lip gloss -- and a card that tells you where to order more.

valli.herman@latimes.com