





*By  
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The "Technocorner" room at the HI hotel features a wide-screen that provides visual entertainment whether you're lounging in bed or soaking in the tub.



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### *The Trend*

For years, France's high-end hotels made their guests feel like 18th-century aristocrats, surrounding them with elegant silk brocades, period antiques, sparkling chandeliers and murals of royal hunting expeditions. Mid-range hotels were also predictably traditional, although an occasional aging beauty would be given a groovy '60s or '70s kaleidoscopic makeover—all rather painful to behold today. As for new hotels, they generally offered the standard cookie-cutter décor typical of large chains. "Innovative design" was regarded as something of an oxymoron in the lodging business.

In the 1980s, hotel proprietors began to wise up to the demands of an increasingly savvy international clientele. Shaking off the dust of old Europe, designers tore out the Toile de Jouy fabrics, stripped off the gold leaf and replaced it with forward-looking, individualized décor—sometimes minimalist and muted Zen, sometimes flashy glam-rock. Hotels entertained, pampered and above all cultivated a "nouveau feeling," right down to cheery service. A new aesthetic was born: boutique hotels. Club music throbbing in lobbies moodily lit with countless votive candles was the new cliché.

In the early '90s, the desire to be hip upped the ante even further. The billowy silk look of the boutique hotel gave way to a still newer wave of "design hotels" that felt even more consciously and conspicuously, well, designed. With monochromatic color schemes, custom furniture, electronic gadgetry and DJ booths, some of these hotels have become—in addition to posh places to sleep—artsy playpens and pick-up spots.

Who's to be praised—or blamed—for this new hotel aesthetic? The trend was worldwide, but it's safe to say that French designers were key ringleaders. In New York, Andrée Putman and Philippe Starck, both French protégés of Ian Schrager, redesigned Morgans Hotel (in 1984) and the Paramount Hotel (in 1990), respectively. Their notions quickly jumped to Paris, where in 1991 Grace Leo-Andrieu's Hôtel Montalembert was the first four-star to "go design" with its blue-and-white stripes created by Christian Liaigre. (Later, Leo-Andrieu would open another Left Bank fashionista hang-out, the Bel-Ami). By 2001, Putman had designed her own Paris hotel, Pershing Hall, a minimalist temple just off the Champs-Élysées with a jaw-dropping, six-story hanging garden.



- The walls of HI hotel's "Digitale" room represent giant pixels in a space inspired by cyber culture.
- Drink dispensers offer HI guests a selection of water, juice, beer and champagne.
- Guest rooms at the Murano have a retro-chic sensibility.
- The colorful Murano bar provides a sleek backdrop for sipping cocktails or enjoying a light meal.

Paris being Paris, it is expected to embrace the trendy. But two years before the Montalembert et al., the countryside had already discovered design with the Hôtel St. James in Bouliac, across the river from Bordeaux. Visionary chef-owner Jean-Marie Amat risked hiring the then-unknown Jean Nouvel, today famous for the Institut du Monde Arabe, the Fondation Cartier and a host of international projects. Nouvel's polished concrete floors and rusted steel-grid exterior, inspired by the region's tobacco-drying sheds, provoked some to compare the new hotel to a "psychiatric hospital"—none of which prevented it from becoming a must for the international wine crowd and Parisian hipsters. Nouvel went on to create similar pared-down looks for the Pierre & Vacances Costa Plana resort in Cap d'Ail near Monaco in 1991, and Accor's La Résidence Dax Les Thermes in Gascony in 1992. Clever hotel design can now be found everywhere from fashionable tourist destinations like St. Tropez, home to the "romantic minimalist" Hôtel La Maison, to a quiet village in the Aveyron, where Michel

Bras's futuristic glass hotel-restaurant resembles an Expressionist science-fiction movie set.

Back in Paris, it's no surprise that hotels at the two- and three-star level are attracting attention for their daring design, from modest establishments such as Axial Beaubourg, Artus and Banville to the more outré Le Général, where silver rubber duckies in the bath offer a kitschy twist on the fad's otherwise deadpan aesthetic. Not wanting to be left out, four-star luxury palaces are now bowing to their design-conscious clientele. The Plaza Athénée invited Patrick Jouin, one of France's top design talents, into its rarefied dining room (home to Alain Ducasse) and bar; the George V Four Seasons is decked out in edgy floral arrangements by Jeff Leatham; and Starck is dreaming up a new champagne bar for the gilded Crillon, slated to open in 2006.

The chains have jumped into the act too. At the Hyatt Park Plaza Vendôme, American Ed Tuttle designed spacious Japanese-Western hybrid bathrooms: The shower is in the center of these rooms, which are separated from the bed by a sliding panel. Out at Charles de Gaulle airport, the contemporary Sheraton Hotel designed by Andrée Putman juts right out of Terminal 2 like a sleek ocean liner.



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Yet amid this flurry to be streamlined, other high-design styles are also cultivating a following: Jacques Garcia, whose neo-Baroque style gave the Hôtel Costes its fashion-cult status, is currently redesigning the four-star Royal Monceau. And this past winter saw the opening of Christian Lacroix's 17-room Hôtel du Petit Moulin, a former bakery converted into an imaginative jewel box of individually decorated rooms, as well as Azzedine Alaïa's 3Rooms 5 rue de Moussy. The ultimate pied-à-terre, it features three studios and is outfitted with the designer's private collection of 20th-century furniture.

If the "design hotel" concept has one drawback, it's the issue of shelf life. Case in point: In 1998, Starck himself was hired to update New York's Paramount. A particularly vicious fashion cycle struck Paris's Bel-Ami, where a wing of rooms was given a quick makeover only three years after the hotel opened. Even at the trend-setting Montalembert, Liaigre's signature stripes finally fell from favor in 2002, ruthlessly torn down to make room for François Champsaur's cool palate of plum, lilac and mushroom. Hotel designers pray their work will withstand the ages but know the public's fickle tastes: What's fashionable and high-tech one day is passé and obsolete the next.

Contact information for the hotels mentioned above is available on [francemagazine.org](http://francemagazine.org).

### Coups de Cœur

From lobby to bar to bed, we've selected some of our favorite cool and amusing décor elements that show the daring ingenuity (if not the folly) of French haute hotel design.

#### / Hôtel Sezz / Urban camping without roughing it

At the freshly opened Sezz, it's the beds that attract all the attention. Literal centerpieces, the queen-sized leather-and-chrome *lits de camp* are placed smack in the middle of the guest rooms, with discreet, under-bed slide-out drawers replacing the predictable nightstands. French designer Christophe Pillet conceived them to complement the ultra-masculine look of these 27 rooms, with their black wooden floors, rough-hewn grey stone walls and "peek-a-boo" glass bathroom partitions. Tucked into the hillside of the chic Passy residential district of Paris, the Sezz has also jettisoned the standard hotel reception desk in favor of a more personalized service: Every guest is assigned his or her own staff member to assist with everything from check-in to choosing a video from the DVD library. 6 avenue Frémiet, 75016 Paris; [hotelsezz.com](http://hotelsezz.com). Double rooms from €225; suites from €450.

#### / Murano Urban Resort / Stretch couch sans villain

In 2004, the public finally got a glimpse of the new Murano, with its nonchalant exterior (it was formerly a parking garage) and a similarly low-key, black-and-white foyer, whose most notable feature was its missing registration desk. Slip a little farther into the glass-

- The Hotel Sezz's leather-and-chrome camp beds form the centerpiece of each guest room.

- Patrick Jouin's redesign at the Plaza Athénée includes a sandblasted blue glass bar and bar stools that offer a modern take on Louis XV style.

topped courtyard and the real show-stopper is revealed: an expanse of bare white Carrara marble, a skinny strip of flame jetting from an impossibly long, white stone-lined hearth, and a 20-foot white Chesterfield couch. Where's the bald, eye-patched villain stroking his matching white cat? The rooms have plush shag carpets, customizable disco lighting schemes, silver pod-like minibars and fingerprint sensors instead of room keys. Obviously, designers Christine Derory and Raymond Morel had fun making the Murano feel not only retro-chic but

like the set for a spy thriller. 113 boulevard du Temple, 75003 Paris; [muranoresort.com](http://muranoresort.com). Double rooms from €350; suites from €750.

#### / HI Hotel / Rooms with a different view

The HI is something new for the Côte d'Azur: a "concept" hotel by Matali Crasset, a former Starck acolyte. The idea: to reinvent the client experience. "The hotel has nine different concepts. They don't follow an aesthetic theme but instead are based on different ideas of spatial organization," says Crasset. "Each offers a different way to live in a space." The sparsely decorated, brightly colored modular rooms sport such evocative names as "Happy Day" (a combination day/night space with a convertible bed), "Digitale" (the walls and furniture resemble giant pixels) and "Technocorner" (a massive multimedia projection screen is cleverly situated between the bed and the bathtub). Other designer whims include an organic restaurant, a roof-top pool, a split-level, cage-like "Happy Bar" and "bathing zones" instead of bathrooms. High concept or high jinks? Who cares—it's fun! 33 avenue des Fleurs, 06000 Nice; [hi-hotel.net](http://hi-hotel.net). Double rooms from €180.

#### / Hôtel Plaza Athénée / Iceberg bar, cool drinks

The Plaza Athénée led the palace charge to be both hip yet classic when it integrated a bit of high design into its top-to-bottom facelift in 1999. Three years later, this legendary celebrity magnet gave Starck protégé Patrick Jouin free reign to transform the entire bar. Tiny Murano chandeliers now twinkle above bar stools that are amusing takes on Louis XV style, and plush booths along the wall have oversize upholstered backrests that are reproductions of paintings by 17th-century artist Claude Gelée. The flashiest feature, however, is the iceberg-shaped bar made of sculpted and sandblasted blue glass: It lights up when master mixologist Thierry Hernandez sets down one of his cutting-edge cocktails. The notoriously restless models and glitteratti have already come and gone, but this is still a must-see for anyone claiming international coolness credentials. 225 avenue Montaigne, 75008 Paris; [plaza-athenee-paris.com](http://plaza-athenee-paris.com). Double rooms from €690; suites from €910. ◇

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