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## Boutique boom time

From downtown Singapore to Malaysia's tropical rainforests, eco-retreats in Sri Lanka to a beach escape in Boracay, the Philippines, luxury boutique hotels, owned and operated by independent operators, are sprouting up everywhere, as Asians are increasingly recognising them for their value over that of larger chains.

"Asian customers, particularly ones from the mainland, are finding that small independently managed hotels offer big experiences. They offer more personalised services, while their locations allow for a more authentic experience," says Paul Kerr, CEO of Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

With more than 500 luxury boutique hotels in excess of 70 countries, offering an infinite variety of experiences, the group, with properties featuring unique character and charm, has seen its accredited hotels jump 64 per cent to 115 over the past five years.

Fastest growth is expected to be in Asia thanks to China's rapidly growing middle class, who have greater disposable income for holidays. In anticipation of this development, the group, earlier this year, relocated its regional headquarters to Singapore from Sydney.

"Even with the slowdown of the global economy at the end of 2008 and in 2009, things in Asia didn't slow as

much as the rest of the world, bar South America, as demand for luxury boutique hotels continued to increase," Kerr explains.

Most luxury boutique hotels offer the same high standard of integrated services and facilities as the larger chains, but they also provide a distinctively different edge whether through location, architecture, décor or in the unique activities on offer.

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**PAUL KERR**  
CEO, SMALL LUXURY HOTELS  
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Examples include the personalised service at hotels such as Naumi in Singapore, which offers each guest a personal aide upon arrival; the unique location of the Pangkor Laut Resort, set on a 300 acre private island amid ancient rainforests and jungles; and the soon-to-be-opened all-suite Hotel Eclat

in Beijing, which will feature a contemporary art collection featuring artists such as Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol and Zeng Fangzhi.

Elsewhere in the market, where the boutique luxury hotel segment is more mature, that competitive edge has been refined to the offering of authentic experiences outside of the hotel environment.

These range from going on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Vatican to cooking with local mothers in Tuscany and exploring Maori cuisine with a native chef, Kerr adds.

Demand from business and leisure travellers for luxury boutique hotels is expected to surge over the next 12 months as more wealth becomes available and savvy travellers plan more trips over the next year, according to the results of a survey released by the hotel group.

"Travel behaviour has changed dramatically in the last 10 years and this has been affected by the global financial crisis, the cost of air travel, world events - natural and man-made. There is no such thing as 'normal behaviour' any more. What we can say is that travel patterns are settling down and that we are seeing positive indicators such as a resurgence in long-haul travel, longer lead times and increased frequency and length of stay," Kerr says.