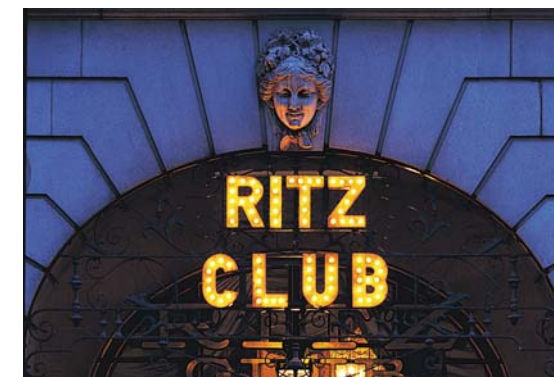




MEMBERS ONLY

Private members' clubs may sound like an antiquated remnant from the 18th century, but many of the classy old-school abodes linger. And now a plethora of contemporary newbies are competing to attract the elite.



THE CLUBS HAVE COME A LONG WAY FROM THE SINGLE-GENDER INSTITUTIONS OF THE PAST, WHERE STAID OLD MONEY RUBBED SHOULDERS AND SECRET MEN'S BUSINESS TOOK PLACE IN THE ANTECHAMBERS.



ON THE TOP FLOOR OF A BUILDING IN LONDON'S Shoreditch a crowd is congregating. Guests amble past the open-air heated swimming pool into a lounge-restaurant bustling with activity. Young media types gather at the bar, while smaller pairings settle down at an artfully eclectic array of tables, perusing the menu. Generous dishes of food appear, delivered by attentive staff, as the city lights twinkle. An extensive vista of London is visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the room.

The scene is duplicated one floor below, as though London's trend-setters have all gathered in one place to see or be seen. Yet this is repeated in five Soho House locations across the city. Kicking off in London in 1995, the club targets high-flyers in film, media and creative industries and now boasts venues in Toronto, Miami, Berlin, West Hollywood and New York. Groucho

Marx's claim that he didn't want to belong to any club that would accept him is clearly not shared by today's "it" crowd.

Soho House is just one story within a rash of relatively new, uber-trendy members' clubs. These spaces subtly sneak into many of the world's hippest cities, with their unmarked doorways only visible to those in the know – in Shoreditch a nondescript shop-front opens into a reception area for members, keeping the riffraff at bay. You have to be a member, or know a member, to know these clubs exist, but open those discreet doors and benefits ranging from restaurants to gyms, pools and luxury rooms are there for the taking.

The clubs have come a long way from the single-gender institutions of the past, where staid old money rubbed shoulders and secret men's business took place in the antechambers. But there's a place for a contemporary form

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Member benefits often include leisure facilities, such as the outdoor heated pool at Shoreditch House, London; The stylish lounge at Shoreditch House; the Ritz Club decor plays on the hotel's history; the Ritz Club attracts its fair share of VVIPs.

of that too. The Ritz Club in London is a name known the world over as one of the most luxurious and exclusive private members' clubs, imbued with that hushed ambience.

"We certainly attract VVIPs to The Ritz and The Ritz Club. I guess that by design we tend to follow the investment and deal-making trends that are happening in London, so over the last 10 or so years there's been a lot of Middle Eastern business. With The Ritz being in the centre of the West End, close to Mayfair, we are very much part of that," explains Roger Marris, CEO of The Ritz Club.

The Ritz Club has been around since 1978 and the hotel since 1906, the décor playing on this history. "The Club is in the basement of the lovely Ritz hotel and we occupy all the rooms that are associated," explains Marris. This includes the Amber Room – inspired by the famous 18th-century



institution of the same name at the Tsarkoye Selo outside St. Petersburg – featuring the work of over a hundred artists and craftsmen from a dozen countries. “Each room was individually designed and we have chandeliers throughout. We spend a lot of time maintaining all of the rooms to a very high standard. We are a very discreet and comfortable club, very luxurious. We understand the comfort and the surroundings that our top customers want to be in and we want to give them that environment,” says Marris.

To this end, The Ritz have recently extended their working hours to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a move prompted by customer demand. “Flights come in at all hours and we see a lot of business people who, when they come to London, don’t come onto UK time – they might be operating on Middle Eastern or Far Eastern time, so they’re doing business while they are sat in the club because it’s business hours wherever they’re from,” Marris explains.

This gets to the *raison d’être* of The Ritz Club – it’s not all about prestige, it’s also about practicality, but in a luxuriously comfortable way. The club is a home away from home, somewhere where guests can relax and avail of the familiar facilities, with people who are attuned to their preferences. “We are a Ritz family and all our members know all our staff. They call us – they might want us to go and pick up their kids from school, they might want to be picked up from their private jets – it’s that sort of relationship,” says Marris.

This is one area where The Ritz Club differs from its contemporary counterparts. There’s not, as such, a joining fee. “It’s not part of the membership per se. We tend to be a complimentary club. We don’t actively advertise for members.

LONDON’S LATEST HIP OFFERING, LIBRARY, IS STARTING FROM SCRATCH, TARGETING PEOPLE FROM LITERARY, DESIGN AND THEATRE BACKGROUNDS.

It’s all by personal referrals,” explains Marris. The joining fee, set at GBP 1,000 according to The Ritz Club website, is a deterrent to those who don’t have an existing relationship. This concept of member referrals is central to many clubs, but it usually accompanies a fee – Soho House requires two referrals and even that doesn’t guarantee entry.

London’s latest hip offering, LIBRARY, is starting from scratch, targeting people from literary, design and theatre backgrounds. “Aside from being an actual library, LIBRARY will offer a complete member lifestyle experience – through 24-hour concierge, boutique hotel, event programming ranging from live music, dinners and dancing to book, backgammon and chess clubs, fitness classes, private dining rooms with conferencing facilities and fireplaces, amazing food and drinks – all curated from books,” details founder Ronald Ndro. “The vision is for LIBRARY to be a place where people come and get positively transformed. Books are a wonderful place to get lost, learn and grow.”

Set in the heart of the West End, minutes from a plethora of playhouses, the dramatically inclined are bound to be happy with the design by Marc Peridis from 19 Greek Street. If that’s not enough stimuli, they can curl up in the trendy members’ space with a limited-edition book. A love of literature is a key attribute of LIBRARY’s members – after all, it’s shared interests and similarities that underlie members clubs. “I think there is



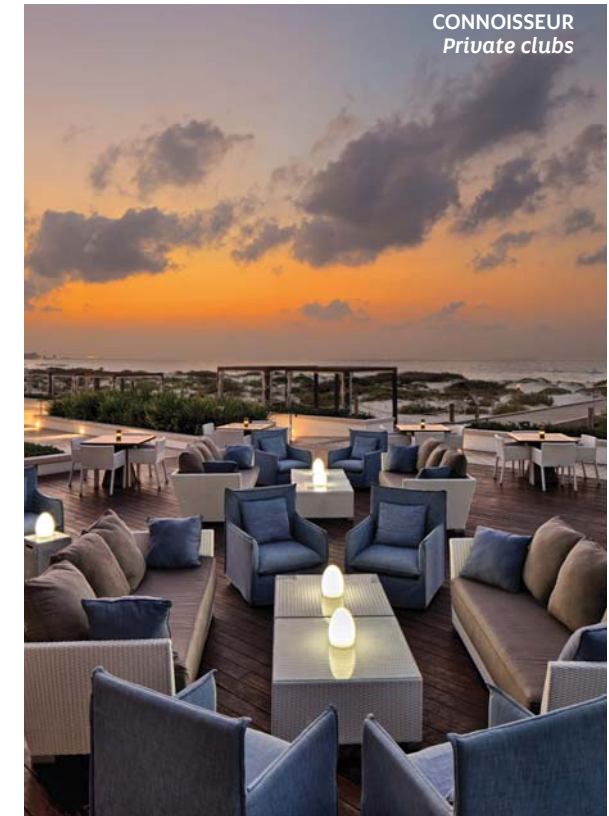
IMAGES: LIBRARY, MONTE-CARLO BEACH CLUB, SAADIYAT, SOHO HOUSE & THE RITZ CLUB

always a need to escape and be surrounded by like-minded people. Members’ clubs provide the ideal place to meet new people and to network,” Ndro advocates.

It’s not all high-end social clubs, either. Lifestyle clubs such as celebrity haunt Monte-Carlo Beach Club, which now has a branch on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island, have been drawing in members for years. “Monte-Carlo Beach, Monaco has existed in the same spot since 1929 and has been synonymous with exceptional quality, exclusivity and is widely recognised as the place to be seen on France’s picturesque south coast. The Monte-Carlo Beach Club, Saadiyat is here to provide what Monte-Carlo SBM, Societe des Bains de Mer, has been doing well for the last 150 years,” explains Bill Loveday, general manager of the Monte-Carlo Beach Club, Saadiyat.

Loveday is dedicated to ensuring the club lives up to its Monte-Carlo heritage, although he is quick to point out the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The library at LIBRARY; the pool and beach are major drawcards for Monte-Carlo Beach Club, Saadiyat members; Monte-Carlo Beach Club, Saadiyat offers beach-view dining; one of the trendy rooms at LIBRARY.



changing role of member-institutions. “Private members clubs have come a long way from the traditional image of wood-panelled, aristocrat-filled mansions in the heart of London’s St James’s. We are now seeing clubs from across the world open their doors to more and more people. As the world becomes increasingly globalised even the most traditional of private members’ clubs are having to wake up and take note,” he says. “We are a lifestyle club and so offer an opportunity for people to more fully develop relationships and enrich their lives,” Loveday concludes.

The lifestyle aspect is something lifestyle management service club Quintessentially focuses on, providing personalised concierge services every hour of every day of the year. Quintessentially is headquartered in London with more than 60 partner offices worldwide, including its latest launch in Toronto. “Generally speaking, members use our service because they want a customised approach to managing their lifestyle. They are time-constrained and our service helps make their life easier and provides them with access to unique lifestyle services and experiences,” explains Shane Reid Mungal, president of Quintessentially Canada.

Whether a lifestyle choice like Monte-Carlo Beach Club or Quintessentially, or a networking hang-out such as LIBRARY and Soho House, the element of exclusivity can’t be overlooked. “I think private members’ clubs are not dissimilar to old-boys networks or private schools that give their patrons a distinct advantage in life,” says Ndro. So is exclusivity a drawcard or a barrier? “It is certainly both. However, there is a tipping point where it is one more than the other. The skill is to know where that is.”