

## Where the Five Stars Are

### *Mobil Issues Latest Rankings As Prices Soar at Posh Hotels; L.A.'s Bastide Makes the Cut*

By PETER SANDERS

**H**IGH GAS PRICES and destructive storms have done their best to slow down the hotel industry, but one segment that can't be stopped is the most expensive.

As Mobil Travel Guide today issues its annual rankings of top hotels and restaurants in the U.S. and Canada, it's clear that luxury hotels have been on a roll, demanding ever-higher nightly rates and bringing the rest of the industry along for the ride. The new version of the Mobil guide—a longtime gauge of poshness that lately has fended off competition from new online travel services—adds one new five-star property, the Four Seasons hotel in Washington, and three new five-star restaurants.

While the prestigious ratings help, top-tier hotels these days don't need much of a boost from rating services. Amid a resurgence in business travel and a growing corps of leisure travelers who are willing to spend freely on luxury options, room rates at luxury hotels average \$250.59 a night—up 7.8% from last year, according to lodging consultants at PricewaterhouseCoopers in New York. In major cities



like New York, San Francisco, Washington and Chicago, where rooms are increasingly filled all week and demand far outweighs supply, the priciest hotels are often asking for—and getting—two and sometimes three times that.

"Luxury and upper-upscale is what drove the hotel industry's recovery and continues to move

*The Venetian in Las Vegas got four stars for the first time. For other rankings, see page D12.*

the industry forward," says Brad Garner of Smith Travel Research in Hendersonville, Tenn. "Occupancy is up, and prop-

erties can charge what they want."

While the luxury segment represents less than 2% of the hotel rooms in the U.S., revenue per available room—a key indicator—is forecast to grow 11.4% this year, compared with industry-wide growth of 8.3%, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers. Meanwhile, few new luxury hotels are scheduled to open soon.

At the same time, it's becoming arguably more difficult to figure out how to gauge a luxury hotel's level of service. The past few years have seen an increase in hotels marketing themselves as "four star" or "five star"—without actually having received such a rating. And there has been a proliferation of rating systems on Internet travel sites like Priceline, Expedia and Hotwire.

While online ratings services have become a useful resource for the growing number of customers reserving rooms online, some critics have questioned their standards. Some Web sites rely on their sales staffs or base their ratings on lists of amenities provided by the hotels themselves.

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## Mobil Issues Rankings As Prices, Occupancy Soar at Posh Hotels

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Mobil sends inspectors who don't identify themselves to examine properties. Posing as guests, inspectors might call housekeeping to ask for extra toothbrushes, request a last-minute dry cleaning, or order room service and see if the bottled water is opened and poured by the staff.

"The key is to engage the hotel in everyday experiences and see how they accommodate us," says Jayne Griswold, director of quality assurance at Mobil Travel. Mobil is widely considered among the toughest graders, with only 32 lodgings getting its five-star designation.

Hotel companies say they try to recognize what Mobil emphasizes and react to it. "If we do well then we're always happy with it," says a Ritz-Carlton spokeswoman. "And if we don't do so well, then we use those recommendations to try to do better the next time."

### New Five-Star Restaurants

This year, 32 hotels and 15 restaurants received the highest honor from Mobil. The three restaurants added to the coveted list were Bastide in Los Angeles; per se in New York and the White Barn Inn Restaurant in Kennebunkport, Maine.

In the four-star category (119 hotels and 140 restaurants), nine hotels and eight restaurants were added to the list. A sampling of the hotels includes the Mandarin Oriental in Washington; the Inn at Palmetto Bluff in Bluffton, S.C.; the Venetian in Las Vegas; the Ritz-Carlton South Beach, Miami, and the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

In lodging, California led the pack with seven five-star and 22 four-star properties. The five stars include the landmark Beverly Hills Hotel; the Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons in San Francisco; Raffles L'Ermitage and the Peninsula in Beverly Hills; the Hotel Bel-Air and the Chateau du Sureau in Oakhurst.

The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel was the only new property added to the four-star list in California. It joins properties like the Montage Resort & Spa, in Laguna Beach; Bacara Resort & Spa in Santa Barbara, The Inn at Spanish Bay in Pebble Beach and the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, among others.

### New York's Offerings

In New York, four hotels made the five-star cut (none newly added this year): the Point in Saranac Lake; the Four Seasons Hotel, the St. Regis and the Ritz-Carlton, Central Park. The 10 four stars in the state range from the

The Inn at Palmetto Bluff



### Star Quality

Mobil added nine hotels to its list of four-star hotels and restaurants:

- The Setai, Miami Beach, FL
- The Ritz-Carlton South Beach, Miami Beach, FL
- The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, Bluffton, SC
- The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island, Kiawah Island, SC
- The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel, Laguna Niguel, CA
- The Venetian, Las Vegas, NV
- The Hermitage Hotel, Nashville, TN
- Mandarin Oriental Washington D.C., Washington, D.C.
- Four Seasons Resort Whistler, Whistler, BC

The Setai



Mercer, Mandarin Oriental, Trump International Hotel & Tower and the Peninsula in Manhattan to the Lake Placid Lodge in Lake Placid and the Mirbeau

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inspectors might call  
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Inn & Spa in Skaneateles.

Other areas with strong showings include Florida, where the Four Seasons Resort in Palm Beach, the Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach in Manalapan and the Ritz-



Four Seasons Resort Whistler



Mandarin Oriental

Carlton Naples received the state's only five-star ratings. (These hotels are temporarily closed but are expected to re-open Friday.) In Colorado, the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs and the Little Nell in Aspen received five stars, and the state is home to three four-star properties.

Chicago plays host to three five stars and one four star. In Georgia, the Four Seasons Hotel in Atlanta and the Lodge at Sea Island Golf Club on St. Simons Island garnered five stars, while a Ritz-Carlton in Atlanta and another in Greensboro have four stars.

Hawaii checks in with the five-star Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea and four-star properties like Halekulani and the Kahala Mandarin Oriental in Honolulu as well as the Ritz-Carlton Kapalua on Maui.