

Found Chicago a chic spin on a hostel

'Limited-service lodging' in River North also will offer a steakhouse, karaoke bar

BY LORI RACKL
Chicago Tribune

A new hotel brand made its debut this month in River North, with some of the rooms starting at prices lower than the cost of parking a car overnight at downtown's swankiest properties.

The hotel, called Found Chicago, is in a building that once housed single-room occupancy apartments at 613 N. Wells St. The four stories and basement were completely gutted and transformed into a 60-room hotel billed as "limited-service" lodging, aimed at everyone from backpackers to business travelers.

Limited-service, alternative lodging, elevated hostels — they're among the many monikers for a growing segment of millennial-minded accommodations that forgo traditional amenities like on-site spas, fitness centers and mints on the pillow at turn-down. Instead, the emphasis is on creating a communal, apartmentlike vibe with a one-of-a-kind look at an affordable price. Some of the no-frills guest rooms are shared, hostel-style.

Found Chicago has nine shared rooms — one reserved for females only. Each is outfitted with two bunk beds, in-room lockers and a bathroom. A bunk can be had for as little as \$24 a night in low season; private rooms with queen-size beds start at \$109, according to the hotel's website, chicago.foundhotels.com. (Rooms get light housekeeping service daily unless guests request a more thorough cleaning, and bathroom amenities are provided.)

Despite the budget pricing, Found Chicago has a funky, boutique-hotel aesthetic created by John Sofio of the high-end design firm Built Inc. The

lobby is a warm, inviting space with brass fixtures, 1970s-style furniture and whimsical touches, like animal statues seemingly plucked from a garage sale. It's meant to be a gathering space, much like the lounge downstairs that's stocked with Yahtzee, Risk and other vintage board games. Guests can use a common laundry room and kitchen too.

"There's a common misconception that if you have a limited-service hotel, you can't have great F&B (food and beverage) or great design; we want to show that's not the case," said John Terzian of Found Hotels' partner, The h.Wood Group, an LA-based hospitality and lifestyle company.

Found Chicago's restaurant, Mason, will be a contemporary steakhouse serving cuts of beef dry-aged in-house, as well as oysters, lobster, duck and other upscale offerings.

A speakeasy-styled basement will hold the karaoke bar and Asian-inspired lounge Blind Dragon, which has locations in West Hollywood, Calif., Dubai and Scottsdale, Ariz. The subterranean space has a dimly lit bar and three private karaoke suites with leopard print carpeting.

The restaurant and Blind Dragon are slated to open in May, along with a lobby-level coffee bar using beans from Chicago roaster Dark Matter.

"They're local, and that's important to us," Terzian said during a recent tour of the property, as construction crews brought in furniture and equipment to get the place ready for the recent soft opening. "We're not trying to be the LA people invading Chicago. That never works."

Terzian oversees branding for the new hotel chain and runs the restaurant and nightlife components of



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

A 1970s vibe permeates the lobby at Found Chicago. Some of the hotel's 60 guest rooms are shared, hostel-style.



Found Chicago is part of a growing segment of millennial-minded accommodations that forgo traditional amenities.

Found Hotels, owned by real estate investment firm Hawkins Way Capital.

Chicago marks the brand's first Found property, soon to be followed by Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The chairman of Found Hotels is St. Louis native Lew Wolff, a longtime heavy hitter on the luxury lodging scene. His companies' portfolios include several Four Seasons, Fair-

mont and Ritz-Carlton addresses.

"This is our first venture into a shared-room hotel concept, appealing specifically to the aspirational traveler and millennial nomad," Wolff said in Found press materials. "We felt that this was lacking from a hospitality standpoint across the U.S."

Shared accommodations aren't unusual in Europe and other parts of the

world, which have long had a robust hostel network aimed at frugal travelers. A classier spin on that trend appears to be catching on closer to home, with hip-and-happening properties offering big price breaks to strangers willing to sleep within a few feet of one another. (It's worth noting that locals aren't allowed to stay in these dorm-style shared rooms; they're meant for out-of-town travelers.)

Chicago-based Bedderman Lodging has three locations offering at least some room sharing within its inventory: Holiday Jones in Wicker Park, Urban Holiday Lofts in Bucktown and, most recently, Field-House Jones, a 52-room boutique hotel in River North featuring DropShot Coffee & Snack Bar and vintage-style slot car tracks in the basement lounge.

Also in River North is Freehand, the hostel-like chain that launched in Miami in 2012. Of its 217 rooms in Chicago, 58 are

shared "quads" that sleep up to four people in beds with privacy curtains. It, too, has a coffee bar, plus a lounge and an outpost of Miami's James Beard Award-nominated Broken Shaker cocktail bar.

The sharing concept isn't a surefire hit, however. When The Robey hotel opened in late 2016, its sister property, the Hollander, was positioned as an upscale hostel. But those multibedded rooms were converted last year into private lofts for The Robey guests.

Terzian, for one, isn't a fan of the word hostel.

"It gives a bad connotation," he said. "It sounds low-end, because that's what it's been for a long time. And that's what we're doing differently. We're bringing elegance and refinement, along with a strong sense of community you don't find in other hotels."

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JERRY DODRILL/VISIONARY WILD

Visionary Wild is offering a photo-related trip in California's Napa Valley later this year.

TIPS, TRIPS & DEALS

Blend photography and wine

BY PHIL MARTY | Chicago Tribune

Visionary Wild is a company that offers travel experiences to photographers looking to move their work to a higher level. It holds workshops led by professional photographers in picturesque locations around the world. One set for Nov. 5-9 offers a chance to blend photography and wine with the Autumn Color in Wine Country workshop, based in California's Napa Valley. This workshop combines classroom instruction, image critiques and numerous field trips to shoot photos in vineyards and other scenic areas, taking advantage of the fall colors. Providing mentorship during the session will be Elizabeth Carmel, a fine art photographer who owns two California art galleries with her husband, and Jerry Dodrill, who worked with acclaimed photographer Galen Rowell. In addition to instruction in areas such as composition and exposure control, processing of images in Photoshop and Lightroom will be covered. The workshop, suitable for all skill levels, is priced at \$4,350 per person, which includes single-occupancy lodging and all meals and beverages. tinyurl.com/yb2fzvhp

Keeping tabs on rewards

Credit-card companies keep upping their travel-reward offerings to lure new customers, but there's more to that story. MagnifyMoney.com, a website that gives advice on personal financial services, has a new study that shows the average number of points given in introductory offers is slightly higher than 40,000 in 2018 — more than double what was given 10 years ago. While the reward bonuses are on the rise, so are the annual fees charged for many cards. In 2008, the average fee was \$74. Now it's \$120. Hotel-branded cards tend to offer more points than airline-branded, but the redemption value per point tends to be lower. In 2018, the average introductory bonus for hotel cards is 60,000, while airline cards' offers average slightly more than 37,000. Study details are at tinyurl.com/y8ctx38r.

Time travel

If you think it's about time to start paying more attention to time, then you might like Masters of Time: A Watchmaker's Tour of Switzerland and Germany from Zicasso. This is a nine-day tour that visits Geneva, Montreux, Neuchatel, Bern, Basel and Zurich in Switzerland, as well as the Black Forest region in Germany. Travelers will learn about Switzerland's best luxury watchmakers as well as the world-famous cuckoo clocks made in Germany. You can step inside the famous tower of Bern's astronomical clock, visit Switzerland's oldest watchmaking school, tour the Museum of the International Watch Company and its collection of watches, and view the world's largest cuckoo clock. The trip is customizable, including dates, and priced from \$6,299 per person, double occupancy. tinyurl.com/ydh84xve

Phil Marty is a freelancer.



GEAR BOX

Hit the road on this bike

BY JEFF BANOWETZ
Tribune News Service

Two-wheeled travel is a great way to see the sights, but buying a bike can be intimidating. Much like when you buy a car, you can be overwhelmed with choices.

The Specialized Diverge E5 isn't for every rider — no bike is — but it does hit a sweet spot that should appeal to a lot of cyclists. The road bike is designed

to also be ridden on gravel trails and fire roads, in addition to asphalt, making it a go-anywhere type of bike.

You'll find more tire clearance than most traditional road bikes, giving you more room for mud, and slightly thicker tires provide more stability. It has mounts for three water bottle holders (as well as mounts for racks and fenders), making it a good option for touring.

It's fun to ride, with plenty of responsiveness and comfort. The aluminum frame keeps the bike light, and a carbon-fiber fork helps ease some of the bumps while retaining rigidity. Despite being an entry-level model, you'll find high-level components throughout.

For cyclists ready for their first serious road bike, this is definitely worth a test ride; \$1,000, specialized.com.

NEED TO KNOW

Keys resort reopens 6 months after Irma

Associated Press

ISLAMORADA, Fla. — Another major Florida Keys resort has reopened after being heavily damaged by last September's Hurricane Irma.

Islamorada's iconic Cheeca Lodge Resort & Spa resumed operations in late March, more than six months after Irma's storm surge devastated the resort's lobby and landscaping and destroyed a 525-foot-long oceanside dock. Many of the 27-acre hotel's 214 guestrooms had



ANDY NEWMAN/EPA

Cheeca Lodge Resort & Spa guests walk on a new pier. The Florida hotel was slammed by a Category 4 hurricane.

water intrusion.

Resort officials say they've done about \$25 million of work, including some renovation projects beyond storm repairs.

With Cheeca's reopening, tourism officials say 80 percent of the Florida Keys' lodging properties

can host visitors. In Key West, more than 92 percent of accommodations are open.

Cheeca officials say they didn't lay off pre-storm employees during the closure and that the workers assisted with the property's recovery.