THE SMALLER PLEASURES

The BLACK INK reader is a well-seasoned traveler who knows the big hitters—the classic luxury hotels that define perennial destinations. Which is why we didn’t bother with those in these pages. Rather, this list provides the off-the-map, lesser-known small hotels (we loosely defined them to have fewer than 50 rooms but sometimes a bit more) that often escape our notice because they lack (or don’t require) powerful press machines or marketing budgets.

These retreats, instead, rely on word of mouth. And that is exactly how this short list has been gleaned—through real recommendations from real people with whom we have built deeply trusting relationships over the past decade. The bylines are not the point; indeed, sometimes it’s a convergence of voices we have refined to create sharp reviews that carry important caveats. Because while we believe this list of 11 hotels is ruthlessly edited, we also think not every property here is perfect for every kind of traveler. Our pinpoint opinions—and breadth of experience—help you, the discerning traveler, to navigate the same same world of luxury resorts and uncover the brilliant, the maverick, the soulful.

We believe this list captures the zeitgeist that the luxury hotel is coming to represent: it is far more than the sum of its parts, be they fine dining restaurants, linen-thread counts, private butlers or staff-to-guest ratios. These hotels are one in a million, and even with their quirks and perhaps even kinks, they will change the way you feel about a destination and, of course, about travel.
GERMANY

II. DAS STUE 
Berlin

In 2012, Spanish interior designer Patricia Urquiola took the former Danish embassy and turned it not so much into a hotel as a chic hangout (das stue means “living room” in Danish), complete with mesh animals in the lounge and a crocodile head prominently placed in the entryway.

Along with a contemporary mix of quilted-fabric sofas and theatrical industrial lighting, the 79-room retreat in Berlin’s Tiergarten dis-trict has another appeal: the hotel bar, con-ceived by Till Hutter of the über-lap Tausend (1300fuss), meets the taste of the city, has the city’s fashion set clamoring for strong-cock-tails and addictive snacks. So even though it’s tucked into quiet, leafy sloven by the city zoo, Das Stue has an alluring, come-hither aesthetic that draws the right crowd: Pharrell Williams recently stayed, and the women of Miśoni—grandmother, mother, daughters—spend a girl’s weekend here. Rooms start at $275. Breitestrasse 1-49 30/317220; das-stue.com.

IRELAND

BALLYFIN DEMESNE 
Clonmel, County Tipperary

Any hotel that arranges white-gloved house-maids in a receiving line as your car comes to a halt at the end of a bluebell-laden drive; or has a butler ready to unpack, press and launder your clothes (at no extra charge); or offers predinner Champagne receptions in a 19th-century rotunda is obviously one of another class.

The 194-year-old manor, located at the foothills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, also has a picnic hut on a gorse moor, a tower, a grotto and an Edwardian garden. Some take the Dormont Abbey effect further to heart, even dressing in period attire purchased from the Lyric Opera of Chicago. (The owner is a trustee there.) But despite Ballyfin’s reputation as the most opulent hotel in all of Ireland, the atmosphere at the recently restored estate is anything but stuffy—also seen at dinner alongside bushel shires: popped collars and loaders worn by guests just back from a day out on the 28-acre lake. Rooms start at $1100. 353-5/78775-5866; ballyfin.com.