



APART FROM THE REST

For travellers who want to combine the comforts of home with the amenities of a hotel, serviced apartments are becoming an attractive alternative. **Felicity Cousins** weighs up the pros and cons

For those of us who stay away on business for anything over a few days, let alone a week or several months, a hotel room can start to feel a little small and limiting.

So it's no real surprise that more and more of us are choosing the freedom and flexibility of an apartment.

The growth of serviced apartments in the UK has been a result of their success in the US, where they mainly cater for relocation and extended stays. Jo Layton, director of sales and marketing for BridgeStreet Worldwide says: "Serviced apartments in the UK are around five years behind the US in growth and what seems to have happened is that we [in the UK] have realised there is another option besides a hotel."

She adds: "The industry is growing rapidly across the UK, and the introduction of the

Staybridge suites [Intercontinental's offering, next year] will lift the industry very quickly."

Three years ago, Christine Boothroyd, director of The Chambers in Leeds, realised there was a market for short-term apartment letting. "We started off with 34 apartments and five of them were short-term lets, but three months later we made all of them short-term lets," she says.

Similarly the Cheval Group, which has six properties, has seen a 15 per cent growth in bookings year-on-year in the business-travel sector, with 65 per cent of its bookings now business travellers. George Westwell, the group's director, explains: "[Firstly] there is more availability, and secondly the travelling public has become more aware of the benefits."

The main benefits of staying in a serviced apartment as opposed to a hotel room are

space and cost – with serviced apartments you simply get more area for your money. Westwell says: "In many cases you are getting twice the amount of space you would in a hotel – our smallest apartment is 37 sqm, whereas the average London hotel room is around 27 sqm, and we go up to 350 sqm."

Layton explains why serviced apartments can offer such good value for money: "Our costs remain the same as a hotel's, but for the guest, because they are not paying for room service and broadband internet access, it is much cheaper. Their room bill can be doubled by these extras in a hotel."

Staying in a serviced apartment means you have a fully-furnished flat with the amenities and services of a hotel, such as 24-hour concierge desk and maid service, satellite TV, internet access, telephones and fax machines.

Apartments will have a living area, a bedroom (or bedrooms) with ensuite, and a fully-equipped kitchen.

Roy McKenzie, general manager for London Serviced Apartments, says: "The great benefits are more space and more freedom rather than being boxed in. You have the freedom of several different rooms and even at the luxury end you can still cater for yourself."

So, with freedom comes choice, something which becomes rather limited if you are eating off a room service menu night after night. In a serviced apartment you can live as you would at home. You can cook for guests or order in. George Westwell says: "Other benefits are that we don't have all the things that can be a nuisance in a hotel. For example, people knocking at your door at eight in the morning, queuing up for breakfast and checking-out."

He adds: "Female travellers staying in hotels may feel uncomfortable going down to the bar, so they tend to shut themselves in the room and have room service, but in an apartment you can safely do what you want."

While the benefits are apparent, at present there is no grading system for serviced apartments as there is for hotels, something Westwell finds a concern. "It's terrible we don't have a rating system," he says. "The problem is government organisations have taken so long to recognise the growth and the quality [of serviced apartments]."

However, this is about to change – Visit Britain's Quality in Tourism aims to set up a grading system this year, thanks to pressure from the members of the Association of Serviced Apartment Providers (ASAP), of which BridgeStreet Worldwide is a member. Layton says: "There is a lot of work to do and ASAP wants it to be graded and the industry legitimised. Now that the government body has been in, it should be in place by April."

Layton believes that the grading system will also add clarity for business travellers booking serviced apartments. She says: "There is a lot of confusion. There are an awful lot of companies that are trading as a third party and a serviced

apartment provider, so it is not always very clear where people are being booked into. People want to know who they are staying with, Marriott or Hilton – it's a comfort zone for travellers to know the brand."

There are certainly different levels of "services" provided, just as in the hotel world. The Ascott group portfolio is a good example, with Ascott Apartments catering for the luxury end, its Somerset Apartments offering a lifestyle brand and Citadines a more budget option.

However, while the long-term benefits of serviced apartments are clear, McKenzie agrees there are downsides, especially for the fast-moving business traveller. "Many apartments may require some level of commitment – there may be a 28-day cancellation period. Unlike a hotel [where you can just turn up and leave], the apartments need that level of commitment."

Jo Layton believes that, although hotels are recognizing the growth in the market for the extended stay, they will not really be threatened by the serviced-apartment industry. "Serviced apartments are suitable for every kind of traveller from leisure to business," she says. "I don't think there is anyone they don't suit unless all you want is a bed and a TV and room service. Some people love room service and for two nights that is fine. Some people will never convert to a serviced apartment."

But as McKenzie says: "Imagine being in a hotel room for three months. Apartments feel a little bit more like home and people really live here." The choice is certainly there.

REVIEWS

So how do apartments measure up? We tested the comforts of a home from home in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Paris, along with the option of ownership in London's Mayfair.

CITADINES APART'HOTEL HOLBORN

The reception and lobby of this Holborn location of the Citadines brand are spacious, smart and, at arrival time of seven in the evening, reasonably busy with people sitting around on sofas drinking wine and eating

snacks, possibly bought from outside. Check-in was problem-free, and I was up to my room on the fifth floor in a couple of minutes.

Citadines Apart'hotels have 42 "residencies" in London, Paris, Barcelona, Berlin and Brussels, totalling 4,800 apartments ranging from studios to two-roomed apartments. The brand belongs to the Ascott Group, the world's largest operator of serviced residences, with about 16,000 serviced-residence units throughout Asia Pacific, Europe and the Middle East. In London the residencies are in Trafalgar Square, Holborn/Covent Garden, South Kensington and Barbican. The Holborn Apart'hotel is a one-minute walk along High Holborn from Holborn tube station (Piccadilly line to Heathrow), directly opposite the Marriott Renaissance Chancery Court hotel.

APARTMENT FACILITIES The 192 apartments are over six floors, including seven wheelchair-accessible flats, 152 studios for one or two people and 40 one-bedroom apartments for one to four people. All rooms are modern, clean, smartly turned out and have a fully-equipped separate kitchen with stove, microwave/grill, fridge and dishwasher. There is free broadband internet access in the rooms, and wifi in the public areas free of charge. I was in a one-bedroom apartment with a separate work area. Obviously with this being a hybrid between hotel and self-catering apartments, there is less staff contact and fewer staff, but they were helpful and able to direct guests and provide assistance. Each Citadines in London offers a business corner with a computer and printer,

