

# San Francisco Chronicle



Photo by BEAUTY WARD / The Chronicle

Cabins and bike paths throughout the Solage resort in Calistoga appeal to a younger crowd, which tends to prefer informal getaways.

## The lap of casual luxury

Younger travelers are big business — and they prefer laid-back resorts

By Carolyn Zinko  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

**L**ike many of his friends, Tim Harmon, a 45-year-old lawyer-turned-hotelier, has vacationed in some of the finest resorts around the world, from Esperanza in Cabo San Lucas to the Four Seasons in Mexico and Hawaii. His appetite for luxe living was whetted at Auberge du Soleil, one of the Napa Valley's finest inns, which his father founded in 1985.

Harmon's five-star holidays were enjoyable, but increasingly anticlimactic. After all, the 400-thread-count sheets, rain showerheads and flat-screen TVs were important details, but they weren't everything. He turned to exotic locales for cultural stimulation — San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and Istanbul, to name two — but those trips came at the expense of the four-star hotel service to which he was accustomed.

As an anecdote, in 2005 he drew up plans for a new hotel chain that would offer getaways that would be lively, not finished, as well as family-friendly, educational and plush. It turns out he isn't satisfying only his own sensibilities but also those of a new generation of traveler: Generation Xers and Millennials — people in their 40s or younger — who spend more on expensive items and as much on vacations as older Baby Boomers, but prefer to enjoy their time off in a different way.

"Luxury is transforming from the physical to the experiential," Harmon says. "There's more to travel than sitting by a pool or having an over-the-top massage."

He and a business partner, Rob Goldberg, 44, of Kentfield, a management veteran of the Hard Rock Cafe and Plumjack Group, are behind the Moana Hotel and Restaurant Group, parent company of the flagship Solage resort on the Silverado Trail in Calistoga, which opened last month. Other Solage hotels are planned for California, Hawaii, Colorado, the east coast of Cabo San Lucas, the Puerto Vallarta area and the Caribbean. Properties under the company umbrella include the El Dorado Hotel in Sonoma, the cosmopolitan Redd restaurant in Yountville and the Piatto restaurant chain — whose decor is going more downscale, with a trattoria-style interior filled with dark woods, but whose Italian cuisine is taking a more sophisticated turn under noted Bay Area chef Chris Fernandez.

Pam Danziger, president of Unity Marketing, a Pennsylvania firm that specializes in consumer insights for luxury marketers, said the duo have good timing.

Danziger calls Generation Xers and Millennials "young affluent" and said her market research shows that this age group's wants and desires will have a major impact on shaping the luxury market worldwide, from the United States and Europe to Brazil and China.

One of the driving forces behind the demand for experiential travel and casual luxury in this age group and economic bracket is simple, Danziger said in a telephone interview. This generation is as wealthy as the Boomer generation, but is at a different life stage. They're younger and more active, or may have children in tow.

"They're engaged in 'we-think' — putting the needs of families first — rather than 'me-think,' which considers the needs of the parents as individuals, so casual luxury is important," Danziger said.

As people become tired of acquiring possessions, they are turning toward "experiential consumerism" in a relaxed, not frigidly formal, manner, she says.

"When we do hotel surveys, we have a problem with fine dining, because fine dining requires a coat and tie and your best behavior to go in. That really is such a turnoff for these young affluent. There's a casual lifestyle for Boomers — Friday business casual dress — but these young affluent have taken casual to an all-new low. Business casual is dressed up for them. Formality and fun don't go together. Why do you go to a hotel? For a fun experience. And that comes with casual."

That's a sentiment mirrored by officials at the Ritz-Carlton hotels, who have seen their clientele in California, Hawaii and Colorado shift in recent years toward younger guests looking for a multigenerational experience on vacation.

"Five or six years ago, it was older, suit-and-tie guests, but now, I've got men walking in wearing board shorts and T-shirts and they feel comfortable doing so — and they have the money the older people had," said Denise French, public relations director for the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel, which underwent a \$40 million renovation in 2005 to soften the formal aesthetic with blue and sand tones, crystal and glass, and to create more spaces for family gatherings.

"The guests are wearing blue jeans," French said, "but they're

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Rob Goldberg (left) and Tim Harmon are planning Solage Hotels for places like Hawaii, Cabo San Lucas and the Caribbean.

# Solage aesthetic is 'San Francisco loft meets Napa barn'

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\$200 blue jeans, not Levi's."

At Solage, where the aesthetic is "San Francisco loft meets Napa barn," thanks to architect Howard Backen, guests can ride complimentary cruiser bicycles into town, groove to music provided by a DJ at the pool or even grab a drink and chat with other guests while making their selections at a communal mud bar before heading to a private cubicle to be slathered in designer dirt.

Goldberg describes the guiding philosophy as one of "approachable luxury."

In this case, approachable is not necessarily synonymous with affordable. Room rates range from \$425 to \$980 a night or more. But compared with Auberge du Soleil, where rooms begin at \$525 and go up to \$3,750 a night, depending on the season, Solage presents less of a challenge to the pocketbook, while promising to maintain a luxurious level of service, albeit with a casual vibe.

"It's not a quiet, luxurious, romantic retreat," said Richard Hill, the general manager of Solage, walking the grounds with visitors as workers planted trees and laid concrete before the grand opening. "It's an active, luxurious retreat," said Goldberg, chiming in.

It is the type of resort that is more likely to draw younger vacationers in Hermes flip-flops and shorts (and their children) than older, distinguished couples seeking solitude, or so Harmon and Goldberg hope.

The staff will not be stuffy and formal, but more relaxed as well.

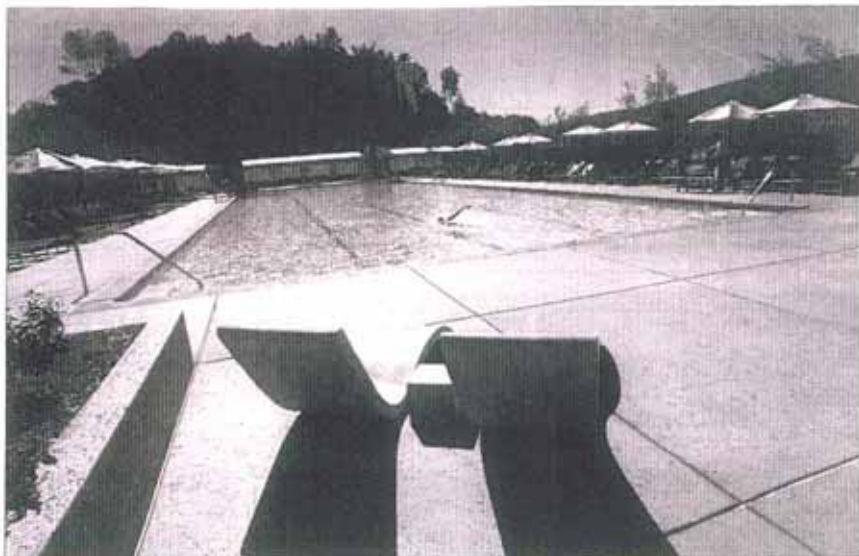
"I don't need a butler," Goldberg said. "It's uncomfortable. We see the service staff as guides more than servants."

Brenda Harrison, 47, of Washington, D.C., the founder of VinoLovers, a wine-tasting and education club, spent last weekend at Solage with a group of 47 club members. She has led group trips to the Wine Country before, and has previously stayed at Auberge du Soleil.

"Auberge is very elegant and luxurious — it's beautiful and lovely European, like the old-country wineries, the mansions-of-Tuscany type feel," she said. "What Solage offers is more casual, more relaxed. It's very elegant, but simple elegance. You don't feel compelled to dress for dinner. You don't have to wear your finest pearls. You can wear costume jewelry and you can feel comfortable. The grounds still need a year or two before they grow in. But it's a beautiful space."

Last week, the group had a formal, gourmet wine-pairing dinner with a "White to Blue" theme featuring white and rose wines. (Executive chef Brandon Sharp, former sous chef at Gary Danko, won praise from the East Coast group for his soft-shell crabs with avocado.)

Harrison's son, Justin, 24, president of the wine club, was so tickled by the informality of the resort that he put on his Armani dinner jacket and pedaled a cruiser bicycle to the ballroom.



The resort has two pools — one for adults and one for families. The adult pool, above, is the larger of the two.

"It was very cool," Harrison said.

Harrison took advantage of the casual atmosphere to wear white linen — albeit a full-length white linen gown.

"Had it been Auberge," she said, "I probably would have worn silk."

The men behind Moana also aim to make each of the hotels fit in with the local aesthetic and culture, so that the hotels feel indigenous and not like cookie-cutter chain outlets.

That is reflective of an industry trend being adopted by other chains, including the Ritz-Carlton. Its hotel in Kapahua on Maui is undergoing a \$125 million renovation that will bring a more Hawaiian look to the property with dark wood floors, Hawaiian-inspired artwork and lanais, and an environmental education center with tide pools, so guests can learn about marine life and habitat, said Kim Kesler, public relations manager for the hotel.

"Resorts have become gated communities. We want to break down those walls. It's not about the isolation, but experiencing what's around you," Harmon said of Solage. "The underlying theme of modern luxury is about the experience, more than the pure indulgence."

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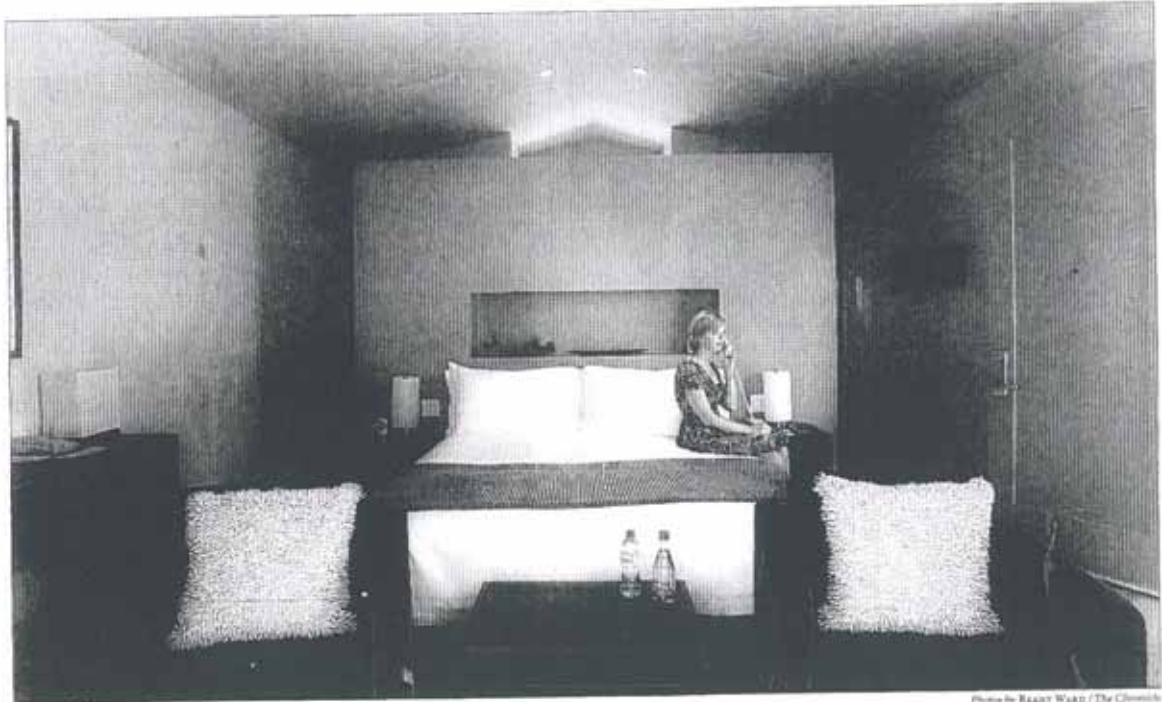


Photo by RAGGY WARD / The Chronicle

This room at the Solage, at a cost of \$425 a night, features earth-friendly furniture and high ceilings. The resort's philosophy is described as "approachable luxury."