

February 20, 2020

How Hotel Gift Shops Got Cool

It's no longer about branded touristy tchotchkes.

A red snapper caught off the coast of **Charleston** could have been Andrew Clay's dinner. But instead, the local artist and chef made a rubbing of his catch on rice paper using a Japanese technique called *gyotaku*. Clay's one-of-a-kind **prints** were previously only available on Etsy, but starting in April, they'll be sold at Charleston's Emeline, the latest boutique property from hotel operator **Makeready**.

Dallas-based Makeready currently operates six independent hotels nationwide: **Noelle** in Nashville and **The Alida** in Savannah (both Tribute Portfolio hotels), as well as **The Adolphus Hotel** in Dallas, **Halcyon** in Denver, **Cliff House Hotel** in Maine, and the upcoming **Emeline**. In the lobbies of the Nashville, Savannah, and Charleston hotels, Makeready operates a retail store called **Keep Shop**, while Adolphus has **Commerce Goods + Supply**.

"We saw an opportunity to make the retail a key component of the [hotel] experience," says Jim Merkel, founder and CEO of **Rockbridge**, the hospitality investment company behind Makeready. They wanted to build an immersive retail shop that would help guests feel connected to local artists like Clay, further grounding each hotel in its community.



Keep Shop at the Alida Hotel in Savannah

Makeready hired **Christine Visneau** to bring this concept to life. With two decades of retail and fashion design experience, she joined the company in spring 2016 as director of retail and sourcing. For the first Keep Shop in the Noelle hotel, Visneau worked to cultivate relationships with local makers like leather craftsman **Tony Daniel** and ceramics artist **Jess Cheatham** to curate items, from wallets to bud vases, some of which eventually were incorporated into the room decor.

“Not only do we have a platform of a store to showcase these designers, but also a whole hotel [where] we can showcase items in the guest rooms,” says Visneau. (For example, Cheatham also created catchall bowls for individual rooms.) Each Keep Shop has its own personality designed to reflect its home community. Visneau says the stores have to complement—not copy—what other boutiques around the city are doing.

Incorporating locally made goods into hotel gift shops is not unique to Makeready. Since 2018, **The Hoxton** has sold its Best Of retail collections created in collaboration with local brands in each city: Think embossed card holders by **Tanner Goods** in the Best Of Portland shop or enamel pins by **Reppin** in Best of Chicago. Plenty of independent hotels are testing the curated retail concept, too—from the TenOverSix boutique at **The Joule** in Dallas to a shop filled with pieces from Mexican makers at **Nizuc Resort & Spa** in Cancun.

It's all a marked change from hotel retail of the past. “The standard hotel gift shop was built more around necessity than excitement, and likely a place that travelers only visited when they'd forgotten something—similar to an overpriced convenience store,” says Martina Luger, chief marketing officer at **Ennismore**, parent company of The Hoxton.

Stephanie Robson, senior lecturer at **Cornell's School of Hotel Administration**, says that there are three main types of hotel retail: convenience amenities, hotel and/or location-branded merchandise, and leased retail whose products share market characteristics with the hotel. In the leased version, shops are typically both street-facing as well as connected to the hotel space—and Makeready and Hoxton are essentially doing a self-operated version of this.

“As small boutique brands, they can probably do this internally with good success,” says Robson. “But the key is going to be to attract non-guests as well as guests, as this approach is hard to scale.”

With four locations and counting, Makeready is proving that scale is possible. **Nashville-based** publicist Samantha Goldstein lives about two blocks from Noelle and frequently pops in to Keep Shop when something in the window catches her eye, like a recent exclusive Stetson hat. She's bought everything from jewelry to cards to a makeup case there, both for herself and as gifts. Yet her favorite thing about Keep Shop is how it supports other local businesses around town through pop-up events. “The Nashville community is so proud, [so] any chance I get to support local, I will,” she says.

Hotel gift shops are likely not enough to lure guests to stay in the first place—but might factor into their decision to come back. **Tori Blackmon** and her husband chose to stay at Noelle last November while in town from Alabama because it was pet-friendly. But Keep Shop was “a lovely surprise,” she says. “It gave me something to look forward to while staying in the hotel—I swung by each time upon entering and leaving.”

Gift stores alone won't make a big impact on hotel revenues. “Retail isn't what it used to be,” says Visneau. But “when you have awesome experiences in your hotel, you're going to get more heads in beds—so if we're not seeing return from actually selling items, we're seeing people wanting to stay there because of those experiences.”

During her stay, Blackmon fell in love with Noelle's **signature scent**, and purchased a roll-on perfume version at Keep Shop. Every time she wears it, it makes her feel like she's still on vacation, she says. “The shop most certainly influenced my travel decisions for the future.” ♦