

In the Club

London is no longer the only European city to boast sought-after private members' clubs. And they are changing with the times to reflect the lifestyle of their jet-setting members

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Right and top right: the rooftop pool and lobby at Soho House Barcelona, situated in a renovated 18th-century house in the city's gothic quarter



Secretive, sophisticated and select, the notion of a private members' club has long conjured up a certain mystique. Offering much more than the overstuffed leather and dusty traditions of yore, many of today's most exclusive clubs can be found in top European destinations.

In 18th-century London, the original members' clubs provided a cloistered haven for their aristocratic members — gentlemen only, as a rule — to relax and socialise in a sumptuously appointed retreat in the heart of the city. Fast-forward to the 21st century and many of the best clubs on the continent — both old guard and new blood establishments — have evolved to reflect the lifestyles of their modern-day, jet-setting members — though luxury and discretion remain key.

"Times have certainly changed when it comes to private members' clubs. People with money and savoir-faire want variety, but crucially, they want an exclusive destination that goes beyond the cachet of membership," says Aaron Simpson, co-founder and Group Executive Chairman of luxury lifestyle concierge group Quintessentially. "They want to feel part of something special — a very select space where they can network, have business meetings, learn, work out, eat dinner, have a drink, go to a nightclub, bring friends and relax all under one roof. Membership to a club like that is a reflection of the individual."

A shining example of this all-encompassing approach is Soho House & Co, a group known the world over for buzzing nightlife, achingly hip spaces and even cooler clientele. Established in 1995 by British entrepreneur Nick Jones, what started as a single venue in London has grown into an international force majeure with 18 "houses" worldwide and counting. Now a major player on the international club sphere, Soho House's philosophy has remained the same throughout its exponential success: offering a comfortable "home from home" for members, who are often selected on the grounds of their creative endeavours, with venues that are strictly anti-corporate and with a strict no-suit dress code. Coupled with elegant heritage properties and forward-thinking design — many cutting-edge names have lent their talents to the brand, including Tom Dixon and Ilse Crawford — Soho House venues are hugely popular places to see and be seen in.

Outside of the UK, Soho House's European locations, including Istanbul and Berlin, are regarded as some of the best in the business. Soho House Barcelona is a particular standout. Situated on the fringes of Barcelona's gothic quarter on Duc de Medinaceli square, the club occupies a renovated 18th-century building topped off with a sun-drenched rooftop



pool and terrace, where guests can relax on the brand's now-iconic striped sun loungers with unparalleled views of the Port Vell marina. The space also features 57 bedrooms, a gym and a chic Cowshed spa designed to imitate a traditional Spanish pharmacy. Similarly, house cuisine exhibits a Mediterranean influence with a selection of tapas dishes and Spanish wines, while a Ceconi's restaurant offers traditional Italian fare.

Of course, Soho House is far from the only success story. Over in Monaco, new kid on the block Thirty Nine Monte Carlo opened in 2016, combining lavish surroundings with a novel USP: sport. With a focus on fitness, health and nutrition, club clients range from tennis pros and Formula 1 drivers to well-heeled business types and affluent members of the public. Founder Ross Beattie — himself a former international rugby player — launched Thirty Nine as the first of its kind in the region.

While Monaco is famed for its decadent lifestyle and A-list movers and shakers, when Beattie's venue was established there were no other private members' clubs to compete against, "other than the yacht club, which has a completely different philosophy. For me, the ideal club is a place where people can relax and be themselves, without having to show off or act a certain way. My goal was to create a social environment where people can do everything under one roof, but also meet friends and create a community. This is a very different concept to anything else in Monaco."

Top: the Ecali Club in Athens is Greece's first members-only club.
Right: within its elegant confines, Thirty Nine Monte Carlo focuses on sport and fitness.
Opposite: historic surroundings at the Carnegie Club's Skibo Castle in Scotland



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Located on Avenue Princesse Grace, minutes from the glamorous Larvotto Beach, Thirty Nine's four-floor space exudes sophistication, all precious wood and marble. As might be expected, fitness facilities are state-of-the-art, encompassing gym equipment, swish studios and even a hypoxic chamber for next-level altitude training. Members can go bespoke with tailored fitness and nutrition programmes, in addition to personal training from professional athletes. After working up a sweat, pampering can be found in the form of a hair salon and beauty treatments, while an on-site restaurant offers tasty health-conscious cuisine from hotshot chef David Knapp.

In Greece, away from the hustle and bustle of Athens' city centre, in a prestigious suburb of the same name, the Ecali Club has been lauded as Greece's most famous — and indeed, first — members-only club since its inception nearly 50 years ago. The site was originally developed as a country club in 1924, but the Greek Civil War saw it utilised as a military base till the mid-1960s, when Ecali locals pledged to create a new social hub for residents of the area. In 1971, the Ecali Club first opened its doors.

Now, an oasis nestled amongst verdant gardens, pristine tennis courts and sparkling swimming pools, Ecali's terracotta-roofed buildings host everything from theatrical performances and wine tastings to lectures, exhibitions and concerts. Unusually for a members' club, families are not only welcomed but actively encouraged, with a plethora of sports, activities and entertainment available for children. Lifelong memberships are not uncommon, which are passed on from parents to children and even grandchildren as a legacy.

Further north amongst the rugged, picturesque Scottish Highlands, historic Skibo Castle is home to the fêted Carnegie Club. Named after the castle's most well-known owner, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who once described the estate's 8,000 acres of gardens, moors and woodland as "Heaven on Earth", the grand sandstone castle offers a truly memorable experience for its members. They can take on the lifestyle of a laird with bagpipe wake-up calls, relaxing in front of a roaring fire in a tartan-furnished lodge and singsongs around the piano after supper. Golfing, fishing, shooting and horse riding are also available within the expansive grounds. Memberships are carefully limited, requiring those who successfully apply to stump up almost €28,500 as a joining fee (with €8,000 to be paid in annual membership thereafter).

"Elegant, rather than opulent, is the style of the Carnegie Club and 'Edwardian house party' is the atmosphere," says chairman Peter Crome. "We recently celebrated our 20th anniversary, and there are members who have been with the club since the start."





Other clubs of note include Silencio in Paris, an intriguing subterranean venue owned by visionary filmmaker David Lynch. Founded to cater to “creative communities” in 2011 — it’s said that applicants have to reveal their artistic achievements — this cult favourite includes a photo gallery, an art gallery and bijou cinema, and also plays host to regular cultural events, though many come simply for the hedonistic club nights.

In the German capital, China Club Berlin draws together the crème de la crème of business, culture, society and politics in its Far Eastern-inspired space, which owner and interior designer Anne Maria Jagdfeld has decorated with Chinese artworks and antiques. Guests at the bar can sip cocktails in a modern take on Shanghai’s famous Peace Bar — all red satin walls and polished mahogany — while suites contain chinoiserie fabrics and hand-carved doors that have been taken from old teahouses.

London, as the place where the club scene began, naturally remains home to some of Europe’s most desirable members-only destinations. While such grand dames as Boodle’s and The Athenaeum continue to quietly uphold their respective heritages, more exciting are the clubs taking steps to move with the times.

For instance, in recent years Annabel’s made the bold decision to close its original world-famous venue in Mayfair, moving two doors down to a new space on 46 Berkeley Square. Now open 24 hours a day, the Grade I listed Georgian mansion contains four floors of restaurants, bars and private dining rooms, alongside a spa, cigar salon and garden terrace. Themed spaces create a fantastical experience for guests; members can sip cocktails in the Jungle Bar, populated by animal print furnishings and exotic foliage, or dine on authentic Central American cuisine in The Mexican Room. Other striking inclusions range from an ornate garden with a retractable glass roof to a nightclub with a hydraulic dancefloor that transforms into a stage.

Meanwhile, another Mayfair stalwart, The Arts Club, recently updated its historic space, which dates back to the 1800s, with Leo’s, a new nightlife hotspot on the lower ground floor. With a decadent, retro design inspired by the famed Riviera clubs of the 1950s and 1960s — think vintage furniture, plush fabrics and retro colourways — Leo’s accommodates both a supper club and a nightclub, complete with live bands and DJs.

Such updating changes are the key to future success, according to Quintessentially’s Aaron Simpson. “Ultimately, the clubs that will stay ahead of the competition and succeed are not scared of implementing change,” he says, “as long as they stay true to the core values that the members have become accustomed to.”



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Left: The Arts Club in Mayfair has added a new space for a supper club and nightclub
Right: which also has four floors for dining and drinking.