

The Guardian

Prison hotels: welcome to a night in the nick

Plans for new 'superprisons' mean some of the UK's most famous old slammers could get a new, very different, lease of life ... as boutique hotels. It's a model that has proved popular elsewhere

Beta



The luxury Malmaison hotel in Oxford, converted from the city's former prison.

British boutique hotels could be about to get a boost from an unexpected quarter. Yesterday, new plans were put forward for a series of "super prisons" holding as many as 3,000 inmates. Which will mean that some of the nation's most famous old slammers could get a new, and very different, lease of life.

A [thinktank](#) has suggested that [notorious nicks such as Dartmoor, Wormwood Scrubs and Pentonville could be reinvented as boutique hotels](#). Where once meals were shoved through hatches in the door, Bolly and blinis will be delivered on room service. In-room massage treatments will replace doing time on a hard bed.

The idea is not entirely new, of course. Back in 2005, [the Malmaison boutique hotel company](#) re-opened Oxford prison as a 95-room addition to its cool chain, promoting "Nights in the nick" from £95. In the notorious A-wing (familiar to fans of Inspector Morse), smart rooms were fashioned by knocking together the original 19th-century cells. They had the advantage of nice, thick, sound-proofed walls, if a somewhat claustrophobic feel, courtesy of high windows and iron bars.

The model has proved popular internationally, too. In Boston, Charles Street jail was given a makeover so chic you could be forgiven for never guessing its original role, except for the tongue-in-cheek name – [the Liberty hotel](#). [The Karosta hotel in Latvia](#) has taken things in a different direction. This ex-military prison offers a freakish themed experience complete with strict guards and cold, unconverted cells.



The Liberty hotel, Boston – once the Charles Street jail. Photograph: Alamy

Most conversions, though, go for the style ticket. At the [Het Arresthuis hotel in Roermond, Netherlands](#), oversized chandeliers and violet mood-lighting soften the effect of what were once gloomy corridors lined with wrought iron. This Dutch creation is a model of how to spin spartan into modern minimalism.

If every town in England has a prison hotel, won't the novelty be lost though? And while it's a bit of a giggle to sip a cocktail where inmates once ferried meal trays, who wants to try to patch up their marriage in a lifer's old cell?

Certain former prisons lend themselves better to the hotel idea than others, too. It will be one thing to wake up with views across Devon moorland, but not all the prisons on the list have the aesthetic attributes of Oxford, or a location such as Dartmoor. There is a chilling hint of Colditz, for example, about [Shepton Mallet in Somerset](#). At 400 years old, it was the UK's oldest working prison until its closure in March, and once housed the Krays. It is a forbidding building in a location that has little to recommend it besides being walking distance from the Mulberry factory shop. Then again, it is splendidly handy for bands booked to play at Glastonbury. Who would have guessed that HMP Shepton Mallet could have a future in jailhouse rock?