

ORANGE

SQUASH



In his first column for Total Hospitality, travel writer, lecturer and consummate guest, Tristan Rutherford deconstructs the 'easy' concept.

How they howled when the good ship easyCruiseOne hit the open seas. The wedge of orange on the Cote d'Azur was 'hardly in keeping'. As incongruous as Union Jack boxers on the Cap d'Antibes, as welcome as a Somali pirate in a naval review.

But there's surely a market? What of svengali Stelios, himself a Riviera resident, stroking that famed where there's muck there's brass crystal ball?

As a writer I was lucky enough (?) to find out first hand. It was superb. Teak decks, heaps of space, a mooring right inside the marina at Cannes and Monaco. The entertainment may not have been quite so classy (quiz night, dance contest) but the punters loved it. Some didn't even leave the boat.

Finding out I was a journalist they cornered me with the hard glare of the converted, determined to right the wrongs written about Stelios and his little orange boat. 'Tell them I'm in St Tropez (as in 'Topaz') for £40 a night. I flew Glasgow to Luton on easyJet, then Luton

to Nice, then on the boat. Guy's a genius.'

It certainly wasn't for everybody. The nocturnal door slamming was evidence of what an '80s tabloid would refer to as 'bed hopping'. There was no room in the Jacuzzi for us, and my wife didn't want to 'wake up eight hours pregnant.' Quite!

But I'll bet there were at least a million Brits who'd swap Pontins for Portofino in a second. And only two easyCruise boats for them to book on. You do the math.

While Sir Stelios's latest venture isn't an orange love boat, it's nevertheless an easy target. 'A compact orange cell for £20. It must be easyHotel,' cried The Independent.

But just as easyJet savagely deconstructed the airline industry a decade ago, it is prudent to give this bare bones hospitality entrant a closer look. Well, that and I got a mailshot from them before Christmas offering me a double room for £30. I booked two nights. I know, I know, first prize is a night in easyHotel, second prize, two nights in easyHotel...

Firstly, all their London locations are incredibly convenient - Earls Court for trade shows, Victoria for meetings, Heathrow for early flights and free airport parking, and so on. Secondly, you don't have to clean your room on departure, or provide your own soap. Actually, this was the original plan, (heaven knows why they nixed the idea...).

What you do have to provide is a sense of scale (rooms are tiny but clean)

and a sense of humour (erm, the rooms haven't got any windows). You also have to provide a fiver for the TV control. This isn't a deposit - you do actually have to provide a fiver!

Not for everybody, but if just one in every 50 punters is willing to eat their breakfast on the run and forgo their hotel shower cap and Corby trouser press ('No, not the trouser press!'), that equals about two million of the

117 million rooms booked in London in 2008. Not chump change.

And unless you're currently caravanning with Margaret 'green shoots of recovery' Becket, customers are, believe it or not, looking for discounted hotel rates in 2009.

Should small hoteliers start reading the franchise small print? Buttressed by the easyGroup marketing machine, easyHotels are infinitely more visible than their neighbours in the terraces behind Paddington and

South Kensington. And they can squeeze three times the number of rooms into the same 'guesthouse' space. The days of 'doubles from £50' tacked in the window are firmly over.

Could it be a fly in the ointment for the likes of Ibis and H I Express too? Halve the price, take away the kettle and you have easyHotel's toxic orange formula in a bottle. With scores of outlets planned for India, Cyprus and Germany, the heady days of complimentary toiletries may already be round the U bend.

Tristan Rutherford has been a freelance travel writer for Rough Guides, The Independent and Time Out since 2002. Originally based in London, his first travel assignment took him to Nice where he has worked from ever since. 'The coffee, wine and public transport were much cheaper' he claims, 'which as a freelance journalist are overriding factors.' As a guest and reviewer he has set foot in over 3,000 hotels in 50 countries. tristan@rutherfordtomase5partners.com