

Does luxury have a future?

Like so much else in modern life luxury seems to have slipped its moorings. Once upon a time we knew where we were. Luxuries were what the monarchy and aristocracy consumed: houses in the country, staff to serve you, big cars, weekends in the South of France, caviar and champagne, gold plated taps.

But we live in a less deferential, more raucous, emotionally expressive and self-obsessed time and so luxury is increasingly defined not by the traditions of aristocracy but by how we want to define ourselves. The new aristocracy of celebrity plays a big role in shaping those aspirations of course, but what counts as a luxury has become more fluid and confusing.

That is why a self-styled luxury brand such as Burberry can become the uniform of Essex chavs. Thanks to EasyJet and RyanAir going to the South of France for the weekend is something students can contemplate. Many middle class families have staff these days – gardeners, cleaners, nannies, tutors - partly thanks to a growing army of hardworking people from Eastern Europe. The most fashionable restaurants in London do not serve fine spices shipped in from the Orient but roasted beetroot, the kind of food peasants ate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The other week a taxi driver explained to me his plans to spend his retirement moving between his two holiday homes in Thailand. The luxury experience of wandering down a white sand beach, overhung by palm trees is now mass produced in places such as Mauritius.

Luxury experiences come in all shapes and sizes these days. Cheap technology means the average person can walk down a road listening to better quality music than a King could have summoned up a century ago. Even Starbucks claims to have created a little mini-luxury experience in the form of a milky latte. We reward ourselves with these little treats and luxuries the whole time.

Luxuries once stood at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of consumer experiences. But everywhere old hierarchies seem to be breaking down. In a more individualised world of instant communications, cheaper technology and easy travel will the idea of luxury lose its meaning as well?

Luxury has taken many different forms. Indeed for most of human history luxury was frowned upon. Plato scorned an appetite for luxury as a sign of weakness. Roman

philosophers counselled that insatiable appetites for luxuries would unravel the social order. Luxuries became something to aspire to, only when courts began to display their social standing by what they consumed. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century flat plates and sugar were considered luxuries. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was pepper. As consumer society flourished so did the pursuit of luxury as a mark of social distinction. In Elizabethan times luxury items were judged by patina upon them: the shinier something was, the better it was because that meant it was old. Luxury could not be “nouveau.” The rise of Josiah Wedgwood’s crockery empire fatally breached that association of luxury with the old. Wedgwood invited consumers to associate the fine with something that was consciously designed and newly made.

Yet though many different foods, goods and services have counted as luxuries, the core to the idea has remained constant and that should help us understand what luxury might become in future.

A luxury is something you do not need. To enjoy a luxury a consumer needs surplus income to spend on things that are superfluous. Something is a luxury only if it carries a particular kind of exclusivity. Plenty of rarities would not count as luxuries. A first edition of Adam Smith’s, *Wealth of Nations*, might be extremely rare but is hardly a luxury. Luxury experiences are open to only a few people yet lots of people want them. If luxuries spread too fast the sense of exclusivity is destroyed. Luxury cannot be about anything as tawdry as consuming. Luxury is sold to people through flattery: by buying something luxurious they are displaying not just their wealth but their refinement. That is why luxury cannot be sold as consumerism but as discernment, spirituality, healing, getting close to nature.

The other common theme to luxury in all ages is that it reflects what we are trying to escape. Perhaps the first mass myth of luxury was the legend of Cockayne recounted in hundreds of medieval oral poems. Cockayne was a place of unimaginable luxury for people who were familiar with famine: a place where food was so plentiful it was used as a building material. Cockayne had an even, spring-like temperature. Inhabitants remained 33 years old, the age at which Christ died, and consented to gentle offers of love-making. To heal yourself you bathed in mysterious pools. Columbus discovered America in part because he was searching for Cockayne, which many people thought was near the mouth of the Orinoco river.

Centuries later we are still living out this medieval myth of the luxurious life. Whenever we walk into a luxury spa hotel, we indulge in a little bit of Cockayne: a world of never ending hot water, clean towels, service on tap, soothing lotions that make you feel younger, health restoring pools and fine food.

What will count as luxuries for us in future will reflect the everyday experiences we are trying to get away from. In the rapidly growing markets of Asia the answer to that will be poverty and agriculture. Affluent Asian consumers will want luxuries that signal, very publicly, their wealth and how far they have travelled from their family's rural roots. Many of those products may well be European in origin, imbued with a tradition of luxury goods from Paris and Milan.

But in the rich world luxury may well take a different turn in decades to come. In cities where travelling on the underground carries a sense of impending doom then complete security and safety will become a luxury. Psychologists tell us that safety and security are our most basic needs. Consumers in modern societies have moved on to higher goals such as self-fulfilment. Yet when avian flu might be lurking in the ducks in your local park's pond being sure you can protect yourself and your family may become a luxury.

In a world that grows more complex we will put more value on simplicity: from the easy to use interface of the iPod, to the pared down luxury hotels that sell themselves with a less is more minimalism. Designs that mean products can be used almost without thought because they are instinctive and intuitive will be luxuries rather than products like video recorders that display all their controls.

In a more cacophonous, relentlessly always on world, people will look for sanctuary: pockets of calm and breathing spaces where they can be themselves. What many rushed, stressed people want more than anything else is a bit of time. In a world that seems to worship speed going a little faster is not a luxury. Being able to go a lot slower is the luxury. That is what we envy.

We used to work all together, at the same time, in the same place, doing similar tasks, in large offices and factories. These days we work at different times, in different places,

constantly on the move. So being able to be social, to spend time with people, doing the same thing – eating, listening to music – may become a sort after experience.

We are awash with information and communication. It already comes from our mobile phones, computers, Blackberries and multi channel televisions. Soon our iPods will be carrying Disney cartoons. In this world convivial, human conversation, a long lunch, becomes an experience to treasure.

In every city in the world luxury brands – Gucci and Prada, Armani and Mont Blanc – sell the same products. Anything you can buy in an airport is not a luxury. That means luxury will come from finding oddity, idiosyncrasy, something that has not been discovered by others, and does not have a brand upon it. The true sign of discernment is to rise above the need for a brand logo. We will continue to look for experiences that are surprising, exotic and above all authentic.

In the past when labour was manual and life brutish people wanted luxuries to escape the real world. The less authentic, the more refined the better. But in a world where we work with screens and ideas and everything seems to be intangible, experiences that carry a mark of reality stand out. That is why experiences that take us “back to nature” can claim to be luxuries.

The cult of authenticity will also encourage a mythology of where and how things are made. As it becomes easier for consumers to find out where and how products are made, so it will become more difficult for luxury brands to rest on their laurels. Knowledgeable consumers are not impressed by brands that do not deliver superior performance. That is why my favourite website of the moment is one set up by a group of Japanese fountain pen makers who used to be employed by a large company. At the end of their careers these craftsmen got together to make beautiful and idiosyncratic pens that write like a dream and look like no other pen you will have seen. And, no you cannot have the address.

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