

# CHINA NOW



# SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE Newsweek

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PHOTOGRAPH BY NIGEL PARRY  
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# Luggage to Fit Every Yacht and Private Jet

The changing behavior of the superrich dictates innovation in high-end goods.

By NICK FOULKES

**P**REDICTIONS SHOULD COME WITH A HEALTH warning, as they have the habit of confounding those rash enough to make them. So with this caveat in mind, I look forward to a year in luxury that may—only may—see such disparate trends as specialized luggage, witty solutions to problems you never knew you had and transnational tie-ups.

Whatever luxury innovations transpire this year, they will almost certainly result from a shift in the behavior of the superrich. Consider the way they travel. Back in the days of private railway compartments and ocean-liner cabins, a trolley piled high with hard-sided luggage piloted by a cap-wearing attendant was an essential accessory of the itinerant rich person. Today, of course, the wealthy carry their own bags, so prestige luggage is either light—like Olga Berluti's delicious range of vicuña-soft leather bags—or wheeled, like the sleek leather offerings from Valextra. Now, with the increasing proliferation of superyacht ownership and private aviation, we can expect an upturn in the use of big, beautiful bags that do not have to suffer the ignominy of scheduled travel or the less-than-tender attentions of baggage handlers. Already, forward-thinking brands are launching luggage lines catering to the changing needs of the superrich; Valextra has introduced luggage created by the yacht-design firm German Frers, which comes in blue or white and features portable compartments that allows the bags to be easily stored.

But in addition to coming up with covetable solutions to such humdrum problems as how to move possessions about the world, true luxury has a duty to entertain. Life's greatest luxury may be time—but if you are sufficiently insulated from having to work for a living or fret about paying the mortgage and the college fees of one's offspring, time can weigh heavily. Boredom is the thing that rich people fear most, so once they have met their needs (if one can be truly said to "need" private planes and so on), there is an increasing demand for exquisitely crafted items that perform quotidian functions with flair and wit.

This is where luxury gets interesting and designers such as Roland Iten come in. Iten has created objects like a multi-axle belt buckle that can be flipped over in its housing to allow extra girth without having to be undone, a watch fastening that can be adjusted millimeter by millimeter and a little gold shoelace tip that

features a chamber loading action and stops your shoelace from disappearing through the hole. Iten creates objects that solve irritating issues that many wouldn't even consider a problem, and that are, moreover, amusing, individual and whimsical. I prefer luxury when it is a whim rather than part of a business plan.

Nevertheless, luxury is big business that employs large numbers around the world, and the coming year will see some imaginative expansion and brand-extension plans. A clue to the sort of thing we are headed for came at the beginning of December with the announcement that the Swatch Group, makers of everything from humble plastic watches to coveted Breguet timepieces, will take over the manufacture of Tiffany watches. Sometimes I struggle with the idea of Tiffany as a high-luxury brand; it makes lovely things but it makes them for everybody, not just the few. To my Old World eyes, America seems too democratic and inclusive to develop something as decadent, exclusive and, well, *European* as grand luxury. Yet from an esthetic point of view, Tiffany has always had strong ideas, and it will be interesting to see what this marriage of Swiss expertise and American style will bring.

This is not the only transatlantic union; the coming year will see the launch of another American-Swiss partnership when Richemont and Ralph Lauren get together to make watches and,



later, jewelry. Richemont has an enviable portfolio of luxury watch brands including IWC, Vacheron Constantin and Piaget, as well as the jewelers Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels. Ralph Lauren has a unique grasp of lifestyle marketing. When the Richemont-made, Lauren-labeled watches appear on the market toward the end of 2008, they will be stand-alone products, and very high-end ones, too.

Another form of brand extension that we will see more of in 2008 is the increasing presence of luxury brands in living spaces—a trend that goes beyond the mere creation of furnishings. There are already Versace, Ferragamo and Bulgari hotels. Bulgari has been particularly active in this area, opening a hotel in Milan back in 2004, followed by a resort in Bali and a 12-story building in Tokyo; a resort in the Maldives is set to open in 2008. Dunhill, too, is opening what it calls a series of "homes" around the world. The hub of this network will be a membership club in London offering a restaurant, a cellar for members' wines, a cigar garden, a specially decked-out Bentley, a private cinema and four one-bedroom suites.

What is clever about this sort of operation is that it offers what one might call a serving suggestion for the brand's products: giving the customer the opportunity to "live the brand" more totally than before. It would be interesting to see branded residential communities, offering brand-specific activities. After all, there are already Cipriani apartment buildings in New York and Miami; so why not Lamborghini- or Ferrari-themed gated developments arranged around a racetrack, or a Beretta-branded hunting estate? That would certainly start the new year off with a luxurious bang.

**Luxury means finding big-ticket solutions to little problems, like shoelaces that slip through the holes.**