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Beyond the Velvet Rope

Bottle service is a good way to ensure that you gain smooth entry to the hottest nightclubs and, once inside, have a private zone in which to relax.

by TIMOTHY MORIARTY

When a nightclub is truly on—the music soars, the dancing reaches fever pitch and all around you are pulsing lights, gorgeous people and great friends—it can feel like the most exciting, the *only*, place to be.

But gaining entry—waiting behind the rope line, watching others enter a club—can be agony. “What I tell people is, ‘Come early or come famous,’” says Ben Aaron, managing partner of primenightlife.com, a Los Angeles event promotion and management company. There’s another way:

Make reservations for bottle service at the club of your choice.

Bottle service is an arrangement with a nightclub by which the club-goer agrees to buy a number of bottles of liquor or pay an equivalent minimum. That person’s party is granted easy entrance, seated at their own private table and provided with mixers and the services of a VIP host or waitress. The arrangement can sometimes be made at the door, though reservations, if possible, ensure a smoother sail. ▷

Finding bottle service is not a problem. Most, if not all, of the nation's top nightclubs offer it. In Las Vegas: Marquee, XS, TAO. In Los Angeles: Exchange L.A., Opera, Greystone Manor. In New York: Tenjune, 40/40, LAVO. In Miami: LIV, Wall, Mynt. In Atlanta: Andrews Upstairs. In Dallas: Station 4, Avenu. Most of these clubs have been in demand, exclusive, buzz-worthy and red-hot for years in an industry that blows hot and cold.

The challenge is in finding the right club on the right night for your group's expectations. Miami's South Beach is typical. "The main thing about South Beach is that things change so fast, the 'in clubs' go out in a period of a few years," says Jeff Bowman, owner-operator of vipsouthbeach.com. Clubs go out of fashion for any number of reasons. In addition to fickle club kids, a host of legal problems from liquor license violations to safety violations to IRS problems can stop the music.

The role of promoters and DJs can also be vital. Promoters put together special events and have the cachet to attract large numbers of the right people; DJs also have a following. Many of the best-known club nights are private parties. If you're not on the list, you're not getting in. "People may not know which club is strong on which night, what sort of crowd," says Bowman. "The club might be the hottest club in town, but on a given night, it might be empty. The promoter attracts the right crowd—the models, the jet set."

If you're not familiar with the nightclub scene in your vicinity or your destination city, there are VIP service companies, such as Bowman's, that will arrange everything from club reservations to transportation for a per-person fee (\$25 and up). Black Card's Concierge service can also help with arrangements. Some of the high-end clubs in the glitter cities can also take the reins. "Our in-house team can help guests to tailor a perfect experience," says Jason Strauss, TAO Group partner, operating powerhouse Las Vegas clubs TAO, LAVO and Marquee. "By determining their music preferences, party style and more, they can recommend the right one of our venues for a particular day or night."

Whether you plan it down to the minute or take your chances at the door, bottle service will help you get in and increase your chances of a good time. But be prepared to pay.



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Depending on the size of your party (and how exclusive the club is on that night), the club will require a minimum number of bottles or a minimum spend—generally, one bottle for every three people (though with a two-bottle minimum). Prices for a quality but not premium brand of vodka (Absolut, Grey Goose) will start at \$350. For premium brands of spirits or Champagne, the price can soar to \$1,000 or more. Then you factor in the tax (will vary; at least 8 percent), tip (20 percent minimum) and a table or hosting fee. Generally, this works out to about \$250 per person for the night.

Keep in mind that at most clubs a small mixed drink in a plastic cup will cost a minimum of \$15 each, plus tip—plus the time-consuming, uncomfortable struggle to get the bartender's attention. How often will each of you be doing that? And how much fun is that?

"With bottle service, people are paying for the real estate," says Scott Feiwell, marketing director of Velvet Nightlife in Los Angeles. Meaning: the all-important table. Parties of men find the arrangement attractive because flowing spirits and a private table are a great way to attract women. Parties of women find their own private space in a crowded club a great way to create a zone of privacy, security for their purses, not to mention a place to rest stiletto-tortured feet. Priceless.

The minimum spend is a good option if quality drinking, not quantity, is your preference, points out Jeffrey Yarborough, CEO of Big Ink, a public relations and marketing firm in Dallas. He observes that parties are often obliged to buy more bottles than their revelers can imbibe responsibly: "They would do well to spend that minimum on quality mixers or special bartending services instead." Standard bar service mixers are club soda or tonic, fruit juices and limes. But you might be able to arrange for liqueurs, exotic juices and garnishes to make each drink memorable—or the services of a mixologist. "Some clubs place a heavier emphasis on tableside mixology," says Feiwell.

If you and your friends are dropping in on several nightclubs—a drink or two, a dance or two and gone—bottle service is not practical. But if you're spending substantial time at your final club of the night, or one club only, bottle service is a good option, especially if some privacy, ease and pampering are in the cards. ♦