Wow. Are you sure this is a hostel?

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

On my first night in Cleveland last year, I fell asleep spooning my backpack. I maneuvered my laptop beneath my pillow and leaned my favorite red boots against the wall by my feet. For the first time in more than a decade, I was overnighting in a hostel, and I didn’t know what to expect.

But I needn’t have worried. Forget all those images of dimly lit youth hostels filled with grungy backpackers — I was staying at a new, squeaky-clean property that barely belongs in the same lodging category. The 18-month-old Cleveland Hostel (starting at $25 per bed per night) in the hip Ohio City neighborhood is representative of a new breed of hostels opening across the country, attracting guests of all ages.

As new hostels open, they offer an increasing number of amenities to remain competitive.

But the joy of staying in a hostel — the communal experience that makes fast friends out of travelers from opposite ends of the globe — isn’t lost in this modern era of hosteling. There I was, before daybreak, bonding over travel tales with an Eastern European nanny missed her bus, bonding over travel tales, looking at maps, figuring out what they’re doing for the day and deciding to explore together,” Orr said.

“You might see business travelers, families or elderly travelers staying in a [private] private room in a hostel,” he said. “It may not be cheaper than a hotel, but people choose it because of the experience.”

There’s almost nothing else like that.” Perhaps the flashiest entrant to the market is London-based Generator Hostels — the VIP annex of the budget chain, with its playful colors and quirky, whimsical design. The company has eight locations across Europe and expects to have deals signed for Washington, New York and Miami later this year.

The company’s hostels have bars and chill-out areas, and they’re big on parties, art and technology. “The name speaks for itself,” said Josh Wyatt, a partner at Patron Capital, the London private equity firm that owns Generator. “It’s about massive energy.” He said that large properties — an average of 650 beds — allow the company to keep the price under $30 a night.

Hostelling International (HI), the more institutional and less funky hostel option, has more than 4,000 locations around the world and 50 in the United States. One of HI-USA’s largest properties is the 500-bed HI Chicago (starting at $31). Next year, a 60-bed hostel will open in an old Otis Elevator building in Richmond.

During my stay in Cleveland, the hostel felt like home in no time. The Eastern European nanny missed her bus and spent the day in our room; I went out for drinks with a friendly Australian; and my pilot friend arrived from New York and roomed down the hall with a Canadian. A group of civic-minded college students from across the state had taken on Ohio City as a school project, and they held meetings in the common area, discussing issues in the neighborhood, such as safety and development.

On the morning of my departure, I crossed the street to find one of my car windows smashed. My GPS was missing, but I was comforted to find that my fold-up bicycle and favorite red boots, which I’d stashed in the car after the first night, were not. Also comforting: My key card still worked. So I returned to the shelter of the hostel, made myself some oatmeal in the communal kitchen, called my insurance company and eavesdropped on the group of young do-gooders planning their day.