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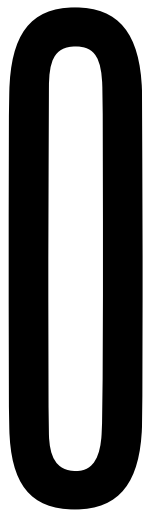


HOW VIP ARE YOU, REALLY?



There are very important clients, and then there are very, very important clients. Here's how to know where you rank.

By **JILL NEWMAN** Illustrations by **MARCIN WOLSKI**



On a warm July evening, an intimate group of elegantly attired guests roamed the gilded halls of the Palace of Versailles, sipping Champagne while being serenaded by violins. The unforgettable party included a candlelit dinner prepared by Michelin-star chef Emmanuel Renaut, a display of rare diamond jewels and a fireworks display that illuminated the sky above the palace while an orchestra played in the famed gardens below. If not for the fact that many of the guests jetted in courtesy of their host, Van Cleef & Arpels, one could be forgiven for thinking

clients to Madrid for three days of carefully planned activities, including tours of art collections, Michelin-star meals, a gala in the 18th-century Liria Palace where Rita Ora performed and, of course, a first look at its Beautés du Monde high jewelry. Louis Vuitton unveiled its 125-piece jewelry collection at an extravagant dinner at the Dar el Bacha palace in Marrakech for clients, as well as Kylie Minogue and Chloë Grace Moretz. Gucci's high jewelry took pride of place at the 18th-century Villa Albani Torlonia in Rome, which contains one of the world's premier private collections of ancient and Renaissance art. At the dinner, British singer Sam Smith wowed the small group in the garden.

There have never been more millionaires and billionaires and, consequently, the global smorgasbord of luxury products has never been more in demand. But because what defines this increasingly attractive corner of the economy is a sense of exclusivity, the makers of high-end wines, cars, watches and other collectibles have had to up the ante. Just

The wine world is intrinsically convivial, so much so that executives sometimes open the doors of their own homes for private events, too. Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of a winery that produces bottles in Napa, Sonoma and Burgundy, has been known to invite his top collectors to dine at the California hilltop manse he shares with his wife and children. The house centers on an indoor pool illuminated by Baccarat chandeliers, and synchronized swimmers, aerialists and magicians have all been brought in as entertainment. At Boisset's 50th birthday party in 2019, Joseph Minafra, the lead for innovation and technical partnerships at NASA's Solar System Exploration Research Virtual Institute, presented the host with a meteorite. Boisset later had chunks of the space rock affixed to bottles of a wine called the Surrealist-Meteor, produced in an edition of just 250, which he offered first to members of his JCB Collectors society, who bought all but a handful of the available bottles, which then sold out in a JCB tasting salon.

So how does one make the journey to Boisset's hilltop—or any other wine-world apex? Start by landing a coveted spot on a winery's allocation list. That first rung of the VIP ladder itself requires a certain display of largesse, but once you're on, you have the distinct privilege of buying cases of wines months before other customers—and at lower prices than you'd pay via your local agent. In some instances, it also means you have access to special bottles that are never made publicly available.

But in the jewelry world, a realm in which the biggest houses produce only dozens of unique pieces annually but the pool of serious collectors is likewise more limited, keeping the VIPs happy takes on heightened importance. "A small number of customers can have a major impact on a jeweler's business," explains Robert Burke, a New York-based luxury consul-

"These houses are doing everything to make their customers feel special and be excited to buy their collections."

they'd time-traveled back to the 17th century, when the merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier presented the Sun King, Louis XIV, with jaw-dropping jewels from his trip to India in the very same rooms.

This fairy tale was a quintessentially private affair (strictly no photos) for the company's top clients, who were invited to celebrate the unveiling of the collection, the Legend of Diamonds—and to indulge in three days of meticulously organized culinary and wine experiences. Before the first cork popped at Versailles, the guests were ferried to private tours and specially prepared menus at Château Margaux one day, followed by lunches at Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte and Champagne Perrier-Jouët.

"The story behind the collection is always at the center of the experience," says Nicolas Bos, Van Cleef's president and CEO. In this case, that story revolved around the 910-carat Lesotho Legend, the fifth-largest rough diamond ever mined, which the French jeweler had turned into a glittering array of high jewelry.

For big spenders, these money-can't-buy experiences have become the norm: This past summer, Cartier flew its premier

as airlines have their silver, gold and platinum status, luxury houses employ similar, if more discreet, rankings for their most dedicated customers—and the kind of attention (and scrutiny) said clients get depends almost entirely on where they are in that VIP pecking order. In one industry, that might mean strolling down the red carpet for a once-in-a-lifetime event. In another, it may translate to being allowed to apply to purchase a new product, once it has been released.

In any luxury industry, though, the payoff for securing VIP clients, who can spend millions of dollars a year with a single company, is astronomical—and some sectors invest fortunes in wining and dining their heaviest hitters. From the upper echelons of wine collecting, for instance, Cardinale, the Napa Valley winery that produces a single (and much sought-after) Cabernet Sauvignon each year, takes a networking approach to VIP relations, hosting private dinners at the homes of its best customers. These insiders are encouraged to invite friends who may be interested in acquiring rare vintages for their own cellars—a little like a high-stakes Tupperware party.

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"We are in the business of emotion," says Mercedes Abramo, CEO of Cartier North America. The house's elaborate high-jewelry presentations for VIPs in glamorous destinations around the world are designed to forge a far deeper

connection with clients than a mere boutique visit might achieve. When a client purchases a piece at one of these events, Abramo explains, “they will remember the moment every time they wear it.” Put another way, a bracelet may be far more meaningful when it comes with a personal story—and bragging rights that you bought it as one of a handful of elite guests at a Spanish palace or a château in the South of France.

But what if you’re just getting started on your climb up the ladder of luxury shopping? An entry-level VIP experience might be an exclusive local party. Last fall, Tiffany & Co. took over a \$50 million art-filled New York townhouse to showcase its new designs, loose gemstones and the trophies it creates for the NFL, the NBA and the US Open tennis championships. Even the historic Tiffany yellow diamond was on display—and the company invited many elite customers in the Americas to take a look.

You know you’re moving up when you get face time with a chief executive. In September, Tiffany CEO Anthony Ledru hosted around 65 VIPs in São Paulo, Brazil, where guests previewed the newest high jewelry in one-on-one meetings. It was there that Tiffany sold one of its most expensive Bird on a Rock brooches to date. Typically, these pieces, which follow a 1965 design by Jean Schlumberger, are set with large citrines or aquamarine stones—and as a result are relatively expensive (this fall, 1stDibs was offering one for \$140,000). But as the São Paulo example featured a fancy intense yellow diamond, its price was in the seven figures.

“I believe the future is more about intimacy, and it’s very hard when you have a very large setting,” Ledru says of the smaller events he stages higher up the VIP food chain. “We believe in small groups where you can truly interact with the clients and really spend time with them.”

Those targeted individuals are treated not only to fabulous trips but also to claims on the most rarefied pieces, which never find their way to the boutiques; they’re presented only to clients with demonstrated buying power and interest. During a Tiffany trip to this year’s Venice Film Festival, one couple made a major purchase—which may be why they were subsequently invited to a

high-jewelry event in Dubai, where they happened to acquire an extremely rare red diamond. While Tiffany wouldn’t reveal its price, a similar stone sold for nearly \$3 million at Christie’s two years ago. The couple met with Tiffany’s design team to turn the stone into a bespoke piece.

The highest echelons of VIP treatment are often marked by this level of collaboration between customers and craftsmen—because there’s nothing quite so exclusive as a one-off you helped design. In most cases, there’s an expectation of privacy around these elite transactions.



The automotive world, which generates breathless speculation about who may have commissioned its unique editions, is famously tight-lipped about how it treats its best customers. Bugatti, which produces some of the most expensive cars in the world, makes paying a visit to its headquarters in Molsheim, France, an exercise akin to a papal audience. “We are not a museum and don’t offer tours,” says Cedric Davy, COO for Bugatti of the Americas. “You are only able to visit the factory if you are a customer, and we only receive one customer per day.”

Rolls-Royce isn’t quite so rigid. In

the past, it has brought groups of VIPs to its factory in Goodwood, England, where in early 2022 a small gaggle of customers was invited to place orders for its forthcoming electric vehicle, the Spectre, months before the public even knew it existed.

But its top rung is reserved for the likes of car collector Michael Fux. By some accounts, the Cuban-born, New Jersey-based mattress magnate owns over 120 rare cars and has purchased 15 from Rolls-Royce. That devotion has earned him a direct line to the company's

For the *crème de la crème* of watchmaking, a cross between a college application and an IRS 1040 may be required.

design department and an entire palette of proprietary colors named after him, from Fuxia—his own shade of fuchsia—to Fux Jade Pearl. According to Martin Fritsches, president and CEO of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars North America, Fux and others of his ilk receiving their commissions warrants “special occasions like Monterey Car Week for public delivery.”

Some high rollers may shy away from such overt displays but still appreciate being courted in an ultra-personalized way that taps into their passions. Boucheron, the French jewelry firm that counts the British royal family among its customers, recently hosted a client and family with an affinity for astrology for a private dinner under the stars at the Côte d'Azur Observatory in France. “To me, there is no point of living a lavish life and dying rich,” says Hélène Poulit-Duquesne, Boucheron's CEO. “It's only about gathering extraordinary experiences and loving memories.” Another example in the house's bag of tricks: an overnight stay in the apartment above Boucheron's historic Paris flagship store (from the bathtub, you get sweeping views of the Place Vendôme), a privilege bestowed by invitation only five nights a year.

Intimacy on this order grew in relevance in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, when most big events had to be cancelled. In response, Cartier invited select groups of VIPs to Jackson Hole, Wyo., (with the option of flying in on your own plane) for three days in October 2021 to view its Sixième Sens par Cartier high-jewelry collection staged in a modern house. Guests stayed in nearby homes and hotels and followed personalized itineraries that included fly-fishing, a fancy picnic and a horse exhibition. “It



was exclusive but still down-to-earth,” explains Abramo, the North America CEO, who spent one-on-one time with each guest. “We were able to engage with clients who don't want to go to a black-tie gala because it's not their style.”

These types of elite events are reserved for the VVIPs, the ones who spend seven figures on a single piece—and Abramo's team makes sure the guest list is a mix of people who will be open to meeting others on a similar level. Those not keen on socializing receive a private after-hours showing at their local boutique instead, or a curated selection of jewels brought to their home or office.

Some invitations may be too good to pass up. Earlier this year, Bulgari CEO Jean-Christophe Babin threw a serious celebration at the Italian Embassy in Paris. Oscar winner Anne Hathaway and Priyanka Chopra Jonas were there, and Carla Bruni sang. Babin says such events underline the house's connection to stars of the silver screen, including Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor, who were notable Bulgari clients in their time. And having their contemporary counterparts at the dinner table with clients is akin to a live-action marketing campaign. When

a celebrity “is wearing a high-jewelry necklace across from you,” Babin says, “you can identify yourself as a potential owner” of the same piece.

Jewelry houses are also adept at determining a client's spending potential and will take pains to do what's needed to facilitate the progression to the next level. Lucy Guo, a Miami-based start-up founder and venture capitalist, was a guest at Cartier's jewelry exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art in May and said the trip gave her a deeper appreciation of the brand. “Cartier really takes care of you and makes you feel special,” she says. Guo and a guest were given a driver for two days to take them to personalized activities, including the gala museum dinner. She returned home having bought a new diamond animal bracelet. Win win.

But while many luxury industries go to significant lengths to cultivate relationships with their best clients, at least one tends to take a contrasting psychological approach: Rather than offering cushy perks or throwing lavish fetes to flatter their best customers, watch companies make them jump through hoops to land the most exclusive products—and convince those clients that the process

is an honor. Thanks in part to extremely limited production and an exponential increase in the horologically inclined, very few can waltz into a boutique and skip back out again with something new on their wrists.

You have to work for it: For the *crème de la crème* of watchmaking, a cross between a college application and an IRS 1040 may also be required. To get hold of the latest Patek Philippe complications, clients must submit applications. Even being asked if you would like to apply is something of a feather in one's cap: To be considered for the gatekeeping form, one must start with the brand's entry-level Calatrava model and climb the ladder to more important pieces over the course of years to prove one's fealty. The questions on the application can range from why you want to buy the watch to your job title (aka your means of income), and there's even said to be a contractual promise not to resell it within a certain period.

For its most coveted releases, Panerai goes so far as to evaluate a client's personality and fitness. To get one of the brand's five-figure Xperience timepieces, you have to go on the affiliated high-octane adventure trip. One recent model, which included a climbing excursion with renowned mountaineer Jimmy Chin, had collectors clamoring for the chance to pay its \$40,000 price tag—but North American brand president Philippe Bonay played hardball. "We knew that one element [for a successful trip] was a certain level of fitness," he says. Hear that? It's the sound of more doors shutting.

On the flipside, in a bid to lure in fresh clientele, Audemars Piguet in 2022 started promising a reserve of Royal Oaks, its best-known and most-coveted model, to newcomers only. But with demand ultra-high, who gets on the first-timer list? "The right way to do it is actually very simple: create and develop a relationship with us," says outgoing CEO François-Henry Bennahmias, making the catch-22 sound laughably straightforward. "When you don't know anyone, you have to get known by our people, and eventually things happen."

So the answer to becoming a VVIP seems to be . . . time. Well, time and connections and taste and money and . . .

Additional reporting by Mike DeSimone, Jeff Jenssen, Viju Mathew and Paige Reddinger

ARE YOU A TRAVEL VIP OR RELEGATED TO STANDBY?

Take *Robb Report's* quiz to find out. By MARK ELLWOOD

► At the planet's best hotels, not all guests are created equal. But how do you know where you rank in the world of high-end hospitality? Award yourself one point for each of the perks you've enjoyed.

WALL STREET HOTEL New York City

A staff member gave you one of the brushed-bronze and mother-of-pearl key fobs hanging behind the check-in desk for free. (The hotel charges non-VIPs \$250 a pop.)

HOTEL BARRIÈRE FOUQUET'S

New York City Developer Joshua Caspi (or the general manager) gave you one of the 200 chrome-clipped roses the hotel commissioned from Israeli artist Nir Hod.

ESPERANZA, AUBERGE RESORTS COLLECTION Los Cabos, Mexico

General manager Marc Rodriguez presented you with one of the 250 bottles of ultra-premium tequila he commissioned from a small-batch distiller in Jalisco.

POST OAK HOTEL Houston

Tilman Fertitta, who also owns the Rockets, or general manager Steven Chou personally invited you to have a drink in the secret oak-paneled room near the top of the 38-story tower that houses the hotel.

RAFFLES THE PALM Dubai

Andrea Fortuna, the in-house furniture master, personalized a gold-leafed item (a hand-carved mirror for women, a wooden hanger for men) that you were gifted on arrival.

ONE&ONLY GORILLA'S NEST Ruhengeri, Rwanda

At check-in, you were given a hand-carved eucalyptus walking stick made by artisans from Harinda Art, a 50-person collective focused on providing single mothers with employment.

PALACE ELISABETH Hvar, Croatia

The management offered to book you into the 13th-century edifice's 968-square-foot penthouse suite—which isn't listed on the hotel's inventory.

ALILA NAPA VALLEY St. Helena, Calif.

The wines you shipped home after your California day-drinking sojourn arrived with a custom-monogrammed glass that's given to only a few lucky guests.

IL SERENO Lake Como, Italy

You booked a suite, but the management upgraded you to the nearby Villa Pliniana, a 16th-century, 17-bedroom palazzo on its own private 18-acre estate.

HALCYON, A HOTEL IN CHERRY CREEK Denver

One of the bartenders gave you the code that unlocks reservations for a three-week period at its on-site speakeasy, B&GC, which has capacity for only 36 guests.

AIRELLES Courchevel and Val d'Isère, France

On one of your ski trips in the past few years, either of these properties has given you a jacket embroidered with your initials, the VIP circuit's black-diamond gift.

If you scored...

1-4 You're a VIP That quiet nod of recognition. The personal selection in the minibar and regular table in the restaurant. You're not just someone, but someone everyone knows or wants to.

5-8 You're a Mega-VIP Invite-only is your only preference. If there's buzz building around a destination, you'll have been there and already moved on.

9-11 You're a Giga-VIP Holy smoke! How many of these properties do you own?? ●