

Hotel chain sells cars, electronics by machine

by TRAVIS REED,
Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, FLA.— In the market for a Bentley sports car, a Jean Paul Gaultier dress or a cell phone, but don't feel like dealing with a pesky salesperson?

Literally at the touch of a button, visitors to the Mondrian South Beach can buy those items — as well as more prosaic hotel gift-shop staples like toothbrushes — from a new lobby vending machine called a Semi-Automatic.

In a postmodern echo of the early 20th century's Automats, where office workers could buy coffee and comfort food without talking to a soul, the Semi-Automatic peddles a jumble of more than 60 items priced between \$10 and \$1.2 million in a large, sleek rectangular display.

"We don't have a newspaper stand or some place where you can just buy a sundry item," front office manager James A. Bryant III said. "We've got Semi-Automatic, which is sort of an 'in-your-face' gift shop. Just like our hotel is really sort of brash and out there."

Never mind the Jean Paul Gaultier dress, the 1965 Corvette convertible or the 24-karat gold hand cuffs. Visitors who really enjoy themselves can spring for a penthouse condo on the property.

"I think it's incredible," visitor Claude Beller from Antwerp, Belgium, said Wednesday. "Out of curiosity I might buy a couple hundred dollars' worth of something, but I'm not going to buy a \$68,000 Corvette."

That appears to be just the reaction New York-based Morgans Hotel Group, owner and operator of 11 luxury hotels in the United States and London, is after as it rolls out Semi-Automats nationwide.

"We asked ourselves, if we do our job of transforming guests into gods or rock stars or whatever description you want to give them, then our customers become more daring, more experimental and especially more indulgent with themselves," Morgans chief marketing officer Scott Williams said. "So if you're in that frame of mind, what do you want to go and buy? A neck pillow? I don't think so."

The giant white-framed and purple-accented display holds row upon row of white, high-gloss boxes, identical but for terse descriptions: "Sunset Dinner Yacht Cruise for 2," "Sony PSP-2000, Black," "2000 Bentley Azure Convertible," "Gunpowder Tea Candle."

Customers can view product images and details on either of two small screens. To make a purchase, they simply swipe a credit card, tap on the product and watch as a motorized arm scoots behind and retrieves it. Products too large for one of the machine's glossy shopping bags are assigned cards that can be exchanged at the front desk for the purchase.

Other vending machines carry cell phones, MP3 players and even disposable shoes for late-night clubbers. But none sates as wide a range of cravings as the Mondrian's Semi-Automatic.

"People just pass by it, and literally even if they weren't thinking about buying something, they sort of buy into the idea. They want to purchase something cool; it's almost a story to tell — really an experience," Bryant said. "I've seen people spend 20 to 30 minutes just looking at the different products, and just be amazed that we're selling just kooky stuff."

The biggest items, like cars and condos, the Semi-Automatic dispenses in two stages. Buyers first pay a nonrefundable \$1,500 deposit that puts the item on hold. Then, hotel staff bring the vehicles around for a test drive or take the buyers to visit the property. Guests who change their minds forfeit the deposit.

"I guess for people who might not want service, it might work great," said Nidhi Agrawal, assistant professor of marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. "Some people might get a kick out of doing this. But if you get a kick out of talking about an



A screen displays details of 24 karat gold handcuffs available for sale at the "Semi-Automatic" vending machine at the Mondrian South Beach luxury hotel in Miami Beach, Fla. Wednesday, April 8, 2009. In a post-modern echo of the early 20th century's Automats, where office workers bought cellophane-wrapped sandwiches without talking to a soul, the Semi-Automatic peddles a jumble of more than 60 items priced between \$10 and \$1.2 million in a large, sleek rectangular display.

(AP Photo/J Pat Carter)

item, gushing about it, then a vending machine might not have the value you're looking for."

Top-sellers so far are gold handcuffs, a gold rabbit's foot and T-shirts with the word "recession" parsed into "Recess Is On" on one side and "(Expletive) the Recession" printed on the other. The shirt reads like a nod to both the hotel's risk in launching a \$250,000 toy in the worst market in decades and customers' willingness to play along.

"When admirers ask where you bought your 2003 Bentley Amagette, we dare you to say you bought it from a vending machine," reads the \$90,000 car's description. ■

Scientists Ask: When Should Alzheimer's Patients Stop Driving?

TAKING a parent or friend off the road because of Alzheimer's is a tough decision for everyone involved, but scientists are using a tricked-out Ford Taurus to determine just when to hang up the keys.



Pops might not be too pleased at the prospect, but at some point, taking early stage Alzheimer's patients off the road is the safe decision, for them and for the rest of the motoring public. Scientists at the University of Iowa are using 35-mile test route and a tricked out Ford Taurus to help develop a simple doctor's office test determine when a patient becomes a danger to themselves and others. Volunteers are tested up front with a variety of cognitive and reaction tests, then the subjects hop in a Taurus with cameras looking in on everything and recording data on a black box. Mistakes on the course are noted and the testing data is combined with the driving data is combined to determine if there is noteworthy correlation.

So far the biostatistics scientists have determined failure in multi-tasking tests has a strong correlation to driving performance whereas memory tests have a much weaker correlation. The hope is to one day boil down the tests which best predict driving performance so they can be given at a doctors office. (AP)

Rare 2-seat Spitfire up for auction

by ROBERT BARR,
Associated Press

LONDON—A rare two-seat version of the Spitfire fighter, the plane that earned a nation's gratitude in the Battle of Britain, may fetch a record price in an auction this month.

This Spitfire is unique — a one-seat World War II-era fighter that became a two-seat trainer in the 21st century.

Bonhams, which is offering the meticulously restored plane at a sale on April 20, estimates it will sell for 1.5 million pounds (\$2.2 million). Retrieved from a junkyard in South Africa 30 years ago, the plane is now certified to fly.

Bonhams' Austria unit, Bonhams & Goodman, sold a 1945 Spitfire Mark XVI for NZ\$3.2million (\$1.8 million) in September, reportedly the record auction price for a Spitfire. That plane had been on display at the U.S. Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio until 1997.

The one now for sale is a Mark IX model delivered on Oct. 23, 1944, one of 23,000 Spitfires built through the war.

It remained a single-seater into its junkyard years; it became a trainer in the shop of Classic Aero Engineering at Thrupton Airport, 66 miles (100 kilometers) southwest of London.

The company's chief engineer, Bruce Ellis, spent weeks tracking down the original specifications for the TR9 trainer version at the Royal Air Force Museum in Hendon, north of London.

Tim Schofield, head of the motoring department at Bonhams, said the Spitfire's reconfiguration is unlikely to affect its value.

Valuable old racing cars or rally cars may preserve little more than a registration plate from the original, Schofield said.

"The key is finding the original ID to start the project," he said, adding that the Spitfire restoration started with a substantial portion of the original.

The Royal Air Force never used Spitfire trainers, so this one is painted in the colors of the Dutch Air Force, which had three and crashed two. The airplane's number, H-99, is the number of the one Dutch trainer which didn't crash.

Ireland, Syria and India also used Spitfire trainers. During the war, the U.S. Army Air Forces' 14th Photographic Squadron flew unarmed and unarmored single-seat Spitfire Mark XI planes on reconnaissance missions.

The first Spitfires were delivered in 1938, and the plane proved its mettle two years later in the Battle of Britain as it took on the German Messerschmitt. The Spitfires matched the speed, if not the climbing rate, of the German planes. ■

KONTRA-RECESSION!
CHECK OUT ALL THE BEST DEALS
TOYOTA OF GLENDALE HAS TO OFFER!

TAMA NA! SOBRA NA! KONTRAHIN ANG RECESSION!

ANO BA ANG DAPAT GAWIN?

ANG ATING MGA KABABAYAN AY NAHIHIRAPAN NA!

DITO SA TOYOTA OF GLENDALE, TAYO'Y AAKSYON!

IBAGSAK ANG TAAS NG PRESYO!

TULUNGAN ANG MAY PROBLEMA SA DOWN PAYMENT

PAGAANIN ANG PAYMENT TERMS!

SAMA-SAMA TAYONG SUGPIHIN ANG RECESSION!

BABAAN ANG INTEREST RATE!

MAPA-BAGO O MAPA-PRE-OWNED MODELS, TUTULUNGAN NAMIN KAYO!

CREDIT CENTER: TINAMAAN BA NG RECESSION ANG CREDIT MO? NEED TO REFINANCE YOUR CURRENT AUTO PLAN? WE CAN HELP! GET PRE-QUALIFIED ON THE PHONE!!!

AUCTION DIRECT PRICING FOR USED MODELS! CHECK OUR LOWER PRICES!

THE FILIPINO DEPARTMENT
COMMITTED TO YOUR SATISFACTION

ALAN DE DIOS 323.944.7840 **LIZA AVISADO 818.209.4526**

SHEILA ISIDRO 818.572.4720 **EDWIN YU 818.720.6215**

HANAPIN PO KAMI SA LOOB NG...

TOYOTA of GLENDALE

CALL 818.572.4719 **1260 S. BRAND BLVD GLENDALE CA 91204**