

Sleep at Any Price

A \$20,000 Mattress? It's Enough to Keep You Up Nights

By Sandra Evans, Special to The Washington Post
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In a modern-day twist on the "The Princess and the Pea," some sleep-deprived Americans are forking over the price of 20 mattresses for just one that promises a solid night's sleep. All-natural, handmade mattresses -- a few with price tags exceeding \$20,000 -- are finding favor among people willing to sink big bucks into a bed they can sink into.

Pat McKiernan, a 48-year-old artist, was so sold on a Swedish-made Hästens import the first time she laid down on it that she didn't balk at its \$6,000-plus cost. "I was driven to get that bed," said McKiernan, of Redding, Conn. "It was enough to make me beg, borrow and steal to get myself into this bed." McKiernan was so pleased with the product that she painted a small watercolor of the cartoon character Gumby against a signature Hästens checked pattern for the owner of the shop where she bought it.

Baby boomers -- a generation known to spend \$4 for a cup of boutique coffee, \$3,000 for a barbecue pit, \$80,000 for a top-of-the-line car -- are driving the market in the ultra-luxe mattress category, marketers say. "They are in their peak buying years. They are also the most health conscious of any generation," said Jim Ross, vice president of marketing for Stearns & Foster, which sells a luxury line of mattresses in a range of \$1,000 to \$6,000 for queen- or king-size mattress sets (www.stearnsandfoster.com). "The two words we hear [from baby boomers] are 'reward' and 'deserve.'"

Ultra-luxury European imports -- such as Hästens, Dux, Hypnos and Vi-Spring -- have hit the American market over the past few years, boosting the visibility of a small niche category that includes century-old American manufacturer Shifman.

Such manufacturers pitch their products as the Rolls-Royces of the sleep market, with each mattress made individually by hand. Some use only all-natural fabrics, such as lamb's wool, cashmere, silk, horsehair and Belgian damask. They claim superior coils that work independently and may be hand-tied eight ways for flexible support. Many are hand-tufted -- meaning a worker pulls a long needle with heavy thread through the entire mattress to secure the internal materials in place, rather than making decorative surface indentions to mimic tufting. The companies say mattresses made to such strict specifications will last for decades.

In the Washington area, Mattress Warehouse of Frederick entered a commoner-royalty marriage with Hypnos of Great Britain, whose pedigree includes making bedding for Queen Elizabeth II and family (www.hypnos.ltd.uk). Mattress Warehouse started selling the Hypnos mattresses out of its Rockville and Richmond stores 1 1/2 years ago and plans to offer them in a dozen or so more locations later this year, according to a company spokesman. Mattress-box spring sets range from \$4,000 to \$12,000, depending on size and style, with only about eight to 12 a week made by hand in Franklin, Tenn., for the U.S. market, said Adrian P. Jones, Hypnos USA director of sales.

Fran Gloger of Potomac and her physician husband, Mark, bought a Hypnos from Mattress Warehouse last year and have been happy with their choice. "We decided to go for something really great," said Gloger, 44, a stay-at-home mom with a 6- and 7-year-old. "My hips were giving me a lot of pain," she said, but after the first night in their new bed, "I woke up the next day and didn't have pain in my hips." Though she doesn't recall the exact price, Gloger said it didn't reach the \$10,000 level for their king-size bed. She said she partly justified the cost by considering that the bed should last for at least 20 years and that some people pay that much for a plasma TV. "When I was introduced to the bed, I didn't flinch that much" at the price, Gloger said. "I haven't regretted it."

This ultra-luxury category is still a small segment of the mattress market. The Alexandria-based International Sleep Products Association reports that mattress sets selling for more than \$2,000 accounted for just 2.5 percent of the U.S. market in 2003. The most typical price range for queen mattress sets in the United States that year was \$500 to \$1,000, winning 44 percent of the market, said ISPA spokeswoman Nancy Blatt.

But retailers are counting on the high-end market to grow quickly.

"It's only been in the past five years that luxury bedding has generated market share in the United States," said Jeff Klein, owner of Sleep Etc. bedding stores in Norwalk and Stamford, Conn., and the proud recipient of McKiernan's Gumby-on-Hästens painting. "It's been an increasing segment of the market. The manufacturers have pushed the envelope every year, and it hasn't been a problem."



Caitlin Pincus and her son Arno Motulsky, 3, try out a Duxiana in the store's sleep chamber. (Photos Helayne Seidman For The Washington Post)

When Hästens first became available in the United States about two years ago, Klein was skeptical about carrying one; at the time, his highest-priced offering cost \$4,000. "I thought I might be making a horrible, horrible mistake bringing in a bed that sells for \$10,000," he said, envisioning being stuck with expensive floor samples. But he was sold on the hand crafting and natural materials and believed there would be a market for it. Now, he says, he has customers willing to wait six weeks to get one. The Hästens product is sold at only 17 locations in the United States, but this should expand to 40 by the end of this year, probably including a retailer in the Washington area, said Roger Ericson, in charge of U.S. distribution for the Swedish company (www.hastens.com). He reports that he recently sent information to three retailers in the District interested in carrying the product, though he declined to name which ones. The price for a Hästens bed tops out at \$17,000, Ericson said, though the average price at their strongest store in New York City is \$8,000.

Vi-Spring, a manufacturer from Plymouth, England, opened its first U.S. store in Scottsdale, Ariz., five years ago and is having no trouble selling \$10,000 to \$24,000 mattresses, mostly by phone, said Roger Magowitz, owner of the Scottsdale store, Bedroom Eyes. With seven retail outlets in this country now, the company foresees more expansion soon, including possibly to Rockville Pike and Tysons Corner (www.vispring.co.uk).

Dux Interiors, a Swedish company that has been in the United States for 17 years, has 35 Duxiana stores in North America, the closest to Washington being in Philadelphia's Center City (www.duxbed.com). "Once about every two weeks I'm down in D.C. delivering mattresses. People buy [Dux] mattresses sight unseen," said Sharon Taft, owner and manager of the Philadelphia Duxiana store. With three styles, priced from \$4,500 to \$9,400 in king size, the top of the line is the most popular with her customers, said Taft. "They are like Volvos. They are expensive, but you can drive them for about a million miles," Taft added. "It's not a frivolous expenditure." The Duxiana flagship store in Manhattan has an experimental sleep chamber, with low lights and music, where customers can try out beds in privacy for three or four hours. Some stores arrange with nearby bed-and-breakfasts to let people try out their product overnight before they buy; they do not give refunds once a mattress is purchased, said Stefan Peters, associate marketing director for Dux Interiors. The company would like to expand into the Washington market, said Peters, but has no definite plans to do so now.

The growing interest in these luxury imports is mirrored in the fortunes of domestic manufacturers of high-end bedding. Shifman, a Newark, N.J., firm that dates back to 1893, now sells 20 times as many mattresses as it did in 1985, according to owner and president Michael Hammer. The company, which sells only through Bloomingdale's in the Washington area, launched an expansion last year that will enable it to triple its volume, said Hammer (www.shifmanmattresses.com). A handmade Shifman mattress takes about nine hours to make, compared with an industry average of 40 minutes, and a queen set on sale costs up to \$5,200, he said.

In April, U.S. manufacturer Select Comfort of Minneapolis also took a new leap into the luxury market by unveiling a higher-end version of its "Sleep Number" beds, with dual air chambers that can be adjusted for firmness for two sleepers by remote control. Priced at up to \$4,200 for a king-size, the new product features a two-sided pillow top, with a Belgian damask silk blend for cooler sleeping and a woven-knit side for a warmer feel. (There are several Select Comfort stores in the Washington area; check www.selectcomfort.com for locations.)

And then there are those who need, or want, truly custom-made beds. Hypnos's Adrian Jones says his company tried to accommodate one wealthy basketball player (whom he declined to name) who wanted a 20-by-15-foot bed for his family. The firm finally produced eight queen-size pieces that they assembled into one piece in the home, he said. The price? More than \$90,000, according to Jones, who mused, "I wonder how he'll turn it."

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