

## No Assholes Allowed: The World's Most Exclusive Clubs Are Embracing a New Policy

Gatekeepers from Switzerland to Mexico have had it with their clientele's entitlement: "Some behavior toward fellow human beings should simply never be dictated by someone's wealth, or tolerated because of it."



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Arriving in Bürgenstock usually involves travel on two forms of locomotion: a boat and Europe's oldest funicular. The Swiss destination is known for hosting one of the most glamorous hotels in the world, as well as a private members' club; it was the site of Audrey Hepburn's wedding, as well as last month's decidedly less elegant negotiations between Iran and the United

States. Equally noteworthy, but far less known, is the resort's firm policy on how to handle guests behaving badly.

For the last decade at Bürgenstock, managing director Christopher Franzen has made a point of personally escorting several guests off the property—including an airline captain who verbally abused a waiter at breakfast and a big spender who also thought he could get away with being disrespectful to Franzen's staff. That high roller has been banned from the property, where rooms can start at 1,500 CHF (about \$1,800 USD) a night in the summer. And those are just two stories of many, says Franzen, who has issued trespassing orders to guests who will not leave willingly. "Some behavior toward fellow human beings should simply never be dictated by someone's wealth, or tolerated because of it," he says.

There's a rallying cry that can be heard in some of the most exclusive venues in the world—however faint at times—about respect and courtesy. It sounds something like: no jerks and bullies allowed. "I've seen the internal files kept on members for more than one club. They aren't FBI dossiers, but they might as well be. They can include complaints from staff, incidents with other members, arguments over bills, drunken scenes, a pattern of treating employees like they're invisible," says Carson Griffith, who writes the newsletter *Rich People Shit*.

At Southworth, a private members' club with several locations, including in the Bahamas and Colorado, they have an internal name for their policy: the "no-asshole rules." More formally, it's referred to as "the Southworth way." The code of conduct, which all members have to sign, includes commitments such as this: "We offer complaints and constructive criticism productively—with the right audience and using the right tone."

Southworth started focusing more specifically on civility, decency, and politeness after COVID, when many employees were fleeing the hospitality industry—all while the membership at their clubs was doubling. "We had some poor interactions between members and staff, so we decided that the way we treat people is by not being an asshole. I looked at 10 other clubs, and they maybe had one rule about decorum, which is crucial for human connection," says Tommy Southworth, president of Southworth. Southworth says it has kicked members out and turned away several others from purchasing multimillion-dollar homes within the club because they weren't "a fit."

But what constitutes an asshole? Is it like pornography, where you know it when you see it? Or is one person's asshole simply another person's VIP? Someone who's paying a fortune, and therefore expects super-human service in exchange for six-figure annual dues or forking over \$4,000 per night for a room?

Many private clubs have a boilerplate code of conduct. But there can be a difference between what is written and the unspoken rules. Griffith says all the legalese and vague language in these bylaws often boils down to this: "If enough people decide you're making the place worse, they have every right to show you the door." And indeed, many have. In 2023, Casa Cipriani, the private club in lower Manhattan that has a strict no-pictures policy, began "purging" members to reshape its roster—an effort allegedly sparked after photographs of Taylor Swift and her then-boyfriend Matt Healy leaked when the pair visited the venue. (Casa Cipriani did not respond

to *VF*'s request for comment.) "The goal wasn't financial; it was cultural. The club wanted a different room," says Griffith. (And perhaps fewer "wealthy housewives out for the night from Long Island wearing gowns and tiaras," as one member described the clientele in 2023.)

Some clubs, like the Robin Birley-owned, invite-only London institution 5 Hertford Street, are so serious about members' sartorial choices that they devote an entire webpage to what is not permitted—no dirty or distressed shoes—but don't appear to publicize a code of conduct. San Vicente, a club which has outposts in the West Village and West Hollywood, outlines their dress code—gentlemen, this is no place to sport a wifebeater—but has no outward-facing rules about behavior. Ultimately, the focus on what a member can and can't wear is a way to project a certain polished, refined, and exclusive image, even if the behavior happening inside the club is questionable. Most of these venues are also taking every precaution to ensure that what happens in the club stays in the club. San Vicente puts stickers over non-members' phones to "remind them not to take photos or videos." First Amendment rights are also checked at the door, with San Vicente's privacy policy stating, "It is strictly forbidden to discuss anything that members or their guests witness during their visit." Maxime's, king of clubs Robin Brearly's first foray into New York at 848 Madison Avenue, is not very specific (at least publicly) about their stance on how members should treat staff, but we do know they allow mandarin collars. (Maxime's also had a no photo policy.)

So aside from tacky clothing and taking photos of celebrities, what does it take to get banned from one of these places?

Golfer Phil Mickelson was recently kicked out of the Farms Golf Club in California's Rancho Santa Fe after he was accused of "inappropriate contact" with a female club employee. (Through an attorney, Mickelson denied the allegations, saying they were contradicted by "objective, video evidence.")

"We heard a story from some of our employees who used to work at a prominent club in Florida where members would stuff the staff in lockers as a joke," Matt Deitch, managing principal at Southworth, told *Vanity Fair* in a phone interview. In April, a five-star hotel in Ireland cancelled an invitation-only conference after learning that Elon Musk, Jared Kushner, and Senator Ted Cruz had been invited.

Some clubs, however, court—or simply attract—a certain type of very rich but unsavory character. In his recent book *London Falling*, Patrick Radden Keefe describes the UK's Annabel's, one of the most exclusive private clubs in the world, as the "beating heart" and main social pipeline for a dangerous cast of chancers, fraudsters, and gangsters who mistake extreme wealth for actual power.

While it can seem like private clubs are proliferating at the rate of Blank Street coffee shops, some tony communities don't want to be anywhere near them. Even East Hampton, one of the clubbiest places on the planet, is putting the kibosh on literal private clubs because of the clientele many of them attract.

When Scott Sartiano of Zero Bond, once the favorite hangout of Turkish Airlines-loving former NYC mayor and current Albanian citizen Eric Adams, wanted to turn East Hampton's Hedges

Inn into a private club, locals revolted over the potential disruption: idling cars, late-night noise, gangs of paparazzi. The town subsequently passed legislation banning “members-only” nightlife spots operating between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., and the Hedges instead was taken over by East Hampton summer resident and hotelier Sarah Wetenhall, who is known to go to fundraisers and events, and has been described as “truly a member of the community.” On the Upper East Side, the community board recently voted against giving Maison Estelle, another pond-crosser, a liquor license due to privacy and quality-of-life concerns; too bad for anyone hoping to grab an espresso martini on the proposed rooftop bar on 81st between Madison and Fifth.

Aside from local zoning laws, how do you keep the assholes out in the first place? The discreet, exclusive club Fasano Fifth Avenue has one answer. It operates on a referral-only model, going on the theory that like attracts like. Presumably, that’s a good thing for a club that is happy with its existing membership.

Ricardo Santa Cruz, one of the founding partners of Xala—a \$1 billion, 3,000-acre sustainable luxury community on Mexico’s Pacific coast where homes start at \$6.5 million—invites every single prospective buyer to spend the night at his home in the remote Costalegre location. While almost all the buyers come through vetted referrals, there’s no better way to get to know someone than spending 24 to 48 hours with them as a houseguest. “I want to make sure these are people whose house you want your kids to go over to play with their kids,” says Santa Cruz.

Though the people who buy at Xala are, by any measure, insanely rich, Santa Cruz says they’re “not the ones talking about their new Patek Philippe watch, what they do, and how they just bought the new G7 and G5 plane.” Dana Eckert and her husband, who live in Woodside, California, bought at Xala a few years ago. Eckert says she was attracted to Xala’s focus on volunteering within the local community. (Santa Cruz says Xala, which has a closing rate of 90%, has sold 40 lots—a quarter of them to billionaires.)

Buyers at Xala are unlikely to be oil and gas executives, climate change deniers, or particularly *evil* billionaires. But they aren’t exactly humanitarian aid workers, either—even if the community, which will include a Six Senses Hotel, made the intentional decision to build an organic farm instead of a golf course.

As no-assholes policies proliferate, their influence could have a transformative effect on the one percent, shifting the true marker of status from net worth to something more basic: how a member of the elite treats others and their surroundings. In theory, anyway. Demand for private clubs has never been higher, but some are looking for a different experience, says Frank Suryan, owner of CDA National Reserve—a private club in Northern Idaho on Lake Coeur d’Alene. More than wealth or prestige, Suryan says he is looking for people who are respectful, welcoming, and community-minded. “When you consistently attract members with those values, the culture largely takes care of itself.”

Or so we hope.