

Personal Business

Not a Fairy Tale: Once Upon a \$20,000 Mattress

By ELIZABETH OLSON

FORGET about \$6,000 shower curtains. If you are really looking to splurge, how about an ultraluxurious mattress?

Last summer, Evette White decided on a king-size model from Hypnos of Britain, which has been supplying beds for Queen Elizabeth II and other members of the royal family for four decades. How much did it set her back? Mrs. White would disclose only that it was at least \$10,000. But she said she and her husband, Timothy, 42, thought it was well worth it.

"I had just gotten a new Volvo Cross Country, and it cost a lot — \$40,000 to \$50,000 — but I only spend a couple of hours in it each day," said Mrs. White, 38, who is a partner in a marketing firm in Nashville. "We're spending six to eight hours sleeping every night, and I realized it is kind of silly that we don't spend more for our mattress."

Make that mattresses. Mrs. White says she also bought Hypnos twin mattresses for each of her three children.

A growing number of consumers are reaching similar conclusions. Some are spending as much as \$20,000 for mattresses made by hand from materials like imported lamb's wool, cashmere and silk. Behind the trend, industry experts say, are the aging baby boomers, who have a penchant for luxury products anyway and who often struggle to get a good night's sleep. Some have become accustomed to high-end beds after staying in luxury hotels, industry experts say.

"As you age, you tend to have more aches and pains, and you gain more weight," said Nancy Blatt, a spokeswoman for the International Sleep Products Association in Alexandria, Va. "Higher-quality bedding becomes more important. We know from the manufacturers that people are buying bigger and better bedding."

Although the trade group has not yet compiled statistics for 2003, Ms. Blatt said that in 2002, about 17 percent of consumers spent \$1,000 to \$2,000 on mattress and box-spring sets, up from 14 percent in 2001 and 13 percent in 2000. (The average price paid for a mattress in 2002 was \$600, she said.) Only 3 percent spent more than \$2,000 in 2002, up from around 2 percent the previous year, Ms. Blatt said. But even those numbers are significant, she added, because manufacturers sell an estimated 73,000 mattresses daily in the United States.

OVERSEAS makers of high-end mattresses have been expanding their presence in the United States. Hypnos, a family-owned company based in Princes Risborough, England (866 749-7667 or www.hypnos.ltd.uk), set up offices in Franklin, Tenn., south of Nashville, about 18 months ago. In a factory in Gallatin, Tenn., northeast of Nashville, a team of workers makes the Royal Comfort line of mattress and box spring sets by hand. The line was sold initially through some upscale stores, but last October, Hypnos also began selling its products through the Mattress Warehouse chain in some Maryland and Virginia stores.

The VI-Spring Company of Plymouth, England (www.vispring.co.uk), which has furnished mattresses to luxury ocean liners since 1901, began selling its handmade beds in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Los Angeles in recent years. And two top Swedish brands, Dux (www.duxbed.com), of Trelleborg, and Hastens Beds (www.hastens.se), of Koping, are also more widely available.

Stefan Peters, the marketing director for Dux, a family-owned company with 35 Duxiana stores in the United States, says that



Stephen Pino, manager of a Duxiana store at Union Square in Manhattan, with a \$4,000 to \$6,500 mattress. The store has two sleeping chambers for customer tryouts.

American sales and the number of American stores have doubled in the last six years. He declined to provide specific sales numbers.

Luxury mattress makers in the United States also report an increase in demand.

Shifman Mattress, a Newark company that sells its products through Bloomingdale's and high-end furniture outlets

(www.shifmanmattresses.com), says sales have risen by an average of 19 percent a year for the last 16 years. The company is expanding production through an addition to its factory that is to be completed this summer. It takes about a dozen people 8½ to 12½ hours to make a queen-size mattress, the company says; each bed is stuffed with fine cotton processed by the company and is

tufted by hand. Its top-of-the-line king-size model goes for about \$12,000.

James P. Ross, a vice president for marketing at Stearns & Foster, the luxury brand of Sealy (www.sealy.com), which is based in Trinity, N.C., says Stearns & Foster now turns out more than 650,000 mattresses and box springs a year, up from 120,000 a decade ago. Stearns & Foster mattresses are priced from \$1,000 to \$5,000 for a queen-size version and up to \$6,000 for a king-size set.

Mr. Ross said the company began to notice a change in consumer buying habits in 1996, when thicker, pillow-top mattresses started gaining popularity. "The market began exploding as baby boomers hit their peak spending years," he said. "People are building huge houses with bigger bedrooms, and they are also installing wider staircases, which has made buying bigger mattresses more practical."

"The new players," he added, "are building awareness of the upper end of the market."

Buyers are drawn to the companies' assertions that these mattresses are more comfortable, and more hypoallergenic, than ordinary, less expensive versions. But are they really worth the \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$20,000 that some people spend?

Some customers think so. Mrs. White said she and her husband had quickly noticed the advantages of the Hypnos over other mattresses. "It's like buying clothes off the rack versus custom-made," she said.

Dr. Scott D. Boden, a professor of orthopedic surgery at the Emory University School of Medicine and the director of the Emory Spine Center in Atlanta, says that there is "no one perfect mattress" for everyone. What one person may find comfortable, another may not, even among the high-end products, he said.

A study published last year in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, said that, contrary to some common advice, mattresses with medium firmness were generally more beneficial to people with chronic back pain than the firmest ones. But Dr. Boden said the ideal mattress was one that could "adjust the firmness, rather than committing to one firmness." Among the companies that offer adjustable firmness are Dux and Select Comfort of Minneapolis. Select Comfort's king-size models sell for \$3,300 (www.selectcomfort.com).

OF course, mattress buyers will not know whether they have found the right fit until they have had a chance to try a bed out for awhile.

In its new Manhattan store in Union Square, Dux installed two sleeping chambers — with lights that dim and surround-sound stereo — for customers to do just that. Each room is equipped with the company's three Dux Bed models, including its top version, called the 7007, with three layers of springs; a king-size version costs \$9,070. The mattresses are made up with linens and Dux pillows.

"We built the rooms because we often heard, 'This feels great, but you don't really know what it's like to sleep in,'" said Stephen Pino, the store manager.

Jan F. Geniesse, 38, a mother of two from Manhattan, recently used one of the sleeping chambers. "I slipped off my shoes and got into the bed," she said. "I fell asleep right away. When I got up, I said, 'This is it.'" She said she had slept for about 10 minutes.

After spending \$8,000 on a queen-size 7007 model (including pillows) with its three layers of springs, including a top layer that can be unzipped and the coils readjusted, "my husband says we're mattress-poor," she said. "Every night, though, when we get into bed, we say, 'Ah, this is the best investment we've made.'" □