

LIFE | 20 ODD QUESTIONS

## Hotelier Ben Weprin on the Best Rooms and Old Jeeps

The developer known for reviving old hotels and college-town inns talks about his love for vintage.



THE TURNAROUND ARTIST | Ben Weprin at Scout antiques shop in Chicago. PHOTO: KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By KATE BETTS

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**ONCE HE GOT** his diploma from the University of Tennessee, it took Ben Weprin only 48 hours to pack up his Toyota Camry and move to Chicago. “I had wanted to start making deals in the real world since ninth grade,” said the Chicago-based CEO and founder of AJ Capital Partners, a hotel development firm. Now 37, Mr. Weprin still looks more like a frat boy than an executive reinventing stodgy hangouts like the Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France in St. Bart’s or the [Malliouhana Resort in Anguilla](#), both of which he restored and relaunched (he later sold the Isle de France to the LVMH group). Another anticipated makeover, the Pontchartrain Hotel in New Orleans, reopens in June, along with its Caribbean Room restaurant, where Rita Hayworth, Frank Sinatra and Truman Capote once dined on Mile High Pie and Trout Eugene.

For his most ambitious project, Mr. Weprin is revisiting his university days. Graduate Hotels, a group of affordable properties, are popping up in college towns across the country, including Oxford, Miss.; Athens, Ga.; and Madison, Wis. Targeting parents in town to visit their scholarly (or not-so-scholarly) offspring, all are furnished with nods to the local alma mater. In Athens, for example, the bedside lamps are replicas of the University of Georgia’s mascot, Uga the bulldog. The next Graduate will open in Ann Arbor, Mich., at the end of this month.



Clockwise from top left: Mr. Weprin’s Jeep Grand Wagoneer; Halcyon House, Australia; a Timex for J. Crew. Mr. Weprin’s pocketknife; a notecard from People I’ve Loved; his favorite recent book. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (BOOK, NOTECARD, POCKETKNIFE)

**The hotel I really want to buy is:** the Nassau Inn in Princeton, N.J. I’ve emailed the guy a thousand times. The town of Princeton is what we look for in a Graduate location in terms of charm and character.

**My dream project is:** to redevelop and redesign an airport. U.S. airports are so archaic. When you go from Hong Kong to the U.S., you’re going from the Jetsons to the Flintstones.

**Every day I wear:** my vintage-style Timex watch.

**My favorite city in the world is:** Chicago. People are genuine and they really support others.

**If I could, I would bottle:** the optimism of right now. I love that people are so optimistic that they feel they can make change anywhere in the world.

**My favorite way to thank someone is:** a handwritten note. I love stationery. I recently got some from a company called People I’ve Loved.

**The best business advice I’ve ever received came from:** Sam Zell, who told me the most important thing is *Shem Tov*, which means your name and your integrity. Make all your decisions upon protecting those.

**My biggest design pet peeve is:** I have a thousand, anything from animal prints to the color mustard yellow.

**The last great book I read was:** “Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer” by Steven Millhauser. It’s the story of a developer who started as a bellhop.

**I collect:** old Jeeps and Grand Wagoneers. I’m redoing a ’71 Jeepster right now. I also like thrift-store art, Nike T-shirts, vintage flannel shirts. I’m kind of a hoarder. It started with baseball cards.



A room at Graduate Ann Arbor

**When I need to get off the grid I go to:** New Buffalo, Michigan. It’s a lakeside community outside Chicago where I go with my family.