

# How the Super-Rich Signal Their Wealth to Each Other

**Gauche display is out. The .1% use a subtler set of cues and signifiers to mark their place on the totem pole.**



Ossetra caviar with potato chips, a Range Rover SV Coupe, a Patek Philippe watch, a Rothko ‘picture’ and a Gulfstream GV. Carl Godfrey

By Holly Peterson

Sept. 20, 2024 11:00 am ET

Sturdy red curtains cordon off the lives of plutocrats at play. To better hide their gilded world from the 99.9%, the super-rich avoid high-end labels, favoring “quiet luxury” and “stealth wealth.” When this affluent army enters our world, they camouflage themselves with earthy-colored cashmere and luxurious suede.

Yank back those curtains, however, and a quandary emerges for the highest of high-net-worth individuals. How to signal to each other where they rank on the totem pole?

Today, especially with talk of new wealth taxes heating up on the campaign trail, gauche display is out. A subtler set of cues and signifiers is required.

The most straightforward symbols start with watches. One Wall Street macher explained, “You see a gold Rolex Daytona, that’s one thing. You see a Patek Perpetual and you say to yourself, *OK, this guy’s playing a different game.*”



It's not enough to go to St. Barts. Your friends need to know how you arrived. Photo: Sean Pavone/iStock

For women, it's about the jewelry. These days, gemstones are too go-go 1980s and flashy. Instead, it's about the weight of gold, so they favor chains thick enough to secure a bike to a lamppost. Hefty charm necklaces from Foundrae are purposely designed to hang coins and medallions on separate links up the collarbone. The message is clear.

Exclusivity brings you up a notch. "You want the thing that has only 10 in existence," explains Plum Sykes, it-girl Vogue contributor and author of the recent novel "Wives Like Us." "In England, with Range Rovers, the company invites people to buy them, like a Centurion Card or a table at the Met Gala. The highest limited edition of 10 is the bespoke SV Burford Edition. You could actually live in it."

Pretending to play down your wealth while emblazoning your net worth in neon requires a lightness of touch. You can't say it outright, but you want it crystal clear.

It's extra tricky in Manhattan, where you can't employ the usual clues of estates and automobiles. Here, people live in apartments many stories up from the sidewalk and out of view. They tend to interact at restaurants and galas, and they never drive.



In Manhattan, where you can't use the usual clues of estates and automobiles, everything depends on attitude. Photo: Lanna Apisukh for WSJ

So everything depends on attitude. You must act like big things in life are, well, no biggie. When you can wrangle people to your abode, serve a tub of Ossetra caviar with Lay's potato chips. Place it out like guacamole on the coffee table.

Verbal cues confer insider status. High-rollers in the art world now refer to the most rarefied paintings as "pictures." Thus, for a would-be bidder, a \$40-million Abstract Expressionist canvas by Rothko is not a "masterpiece painting" but a "picture." For most people, a picture is what your 4-year-old paints with a thick brush and primary colors for Mother's Day.

Travel may be the most efficient way to establish one's place in the plutocratic pecking order. This month, for instance, couples fattened up by too much lobster and Hamptons rosé head to European mountain spas to "shed a few" for a week. They frequent the naturopathic Lanserhof or the VivaMayr in Austria, leaving with this huge takeaway: You have to chew better.

Of course, how you travel is essential. As a former Wall Street bank chairman told me, "OK, so you went to St. Barts. So what? That tells me nothing. How'd you get there? That is key."

To telegraph that you flew private over commercial, those fluent in the language of wealth-speak have created new verbs. People say, “We *NetJetted* into Aspen. We just had to.” Pause. “Because of the dogs.” Transporting “the dogs” is somehow a constant justification for private travel.

Owning your own jet is a huge notch up on the totem pole. The effort to be blasé about your new Gulfstream G650 can be positively tortured. To signal that your NetJetting days are over, you might drop into conversation with a sigh, “We’ve got to find a new pilot.” This should be said in the same tone as a wearied parent complaining about needing a new babysitter.



‘The Asprey,’ a Patek Philippe perpetual calendar chronograph, pictured before it sold at Sotheby’s for \$3.88 million in 2018. Photo: denis balibouse/Reuters

Arriving at the private terminal, avoid too much luggage with zippers because when you fly private, you don’t even need to close your bags. Anything you like can be placed on an empty seat or in the back area. Pack as if loading your station wagon for a weekend trip: a few garment bags and lots of stuffed tote bags. For a slam-dunk move, bring a farmstand tray of petunias you grabbed on the way. That will fortify your *I-do-this-all-the-time* status.

Once seated in your jet, it’s all about projecting casual insouciance. The goal is to appear as cozy and familiar as in your living room. Maybe you go barefoot or lean back casually with hands clasped behind your head (try that on the Delta shuttle). Then you order a Diet Coke or beer and munch on pretzels. Real habitués don’t treat liquor and food on a private jet as if at Versailles.

Not everyone is eager to drop hints. I know one elegant banker who owns his jet and has more fun hiding it than showing it off. When acquaintances dig for clues on his transport and ask when he's leaving, he responds, "Flight leaves at 3:05 or 2:50," the sort of irregular times that commercial airlines use.

Language codes are crucial on the water, too. How to describe your floating palace? The uber-rich will call a seafaring vessel longer than a tennis court my "boat" (a word that conjures up fishing with buddies for most of us). For example, one might hear, "Would you like to spend a few days on our boat on the Amalfi Coast?" In reality, if there is an onboard pizza oven, screening room and a large crew in starched white polo shirts placing magnolias in your Tequila Sunrise, that's a "yacht."



It's important to treat travel on your Gulfstream G650ER like relaxing in your living room.  
Photo: SeongJoon Cho/Bloomberg News

For the beyond megawealthy, smaller "chaser boats" follow the big yachts stuffed with toys like helicopters, Jet Skis and mini-submarines. One yacht in Ibiza this summer had a boulangerie and chocolatier in tow.

As an invitee, never act like a startled tourist in Teva sandals and a fanny pack. Know the rule about putting your shoes in a basket when you get on. After changing into your Orlebar Brown

trunks or caftan from that darling shop in Capri, go to the stern and dangle your feet over the edge like Tom Sawyer on a rickety dock, enjoying a summer day.

But all is not carefree in this rarefied world. There are stressful days. Sometimes the rules of the game make the game itself no fun.

Imagine the finance guy at Manhattan's 34th Street heliport. He's just taken delivery of his AgustaWestland AW139 copter. Since "tricking out" one's copter is key, he's turned a tight 14-seat space into a super-comfy eight seats. He's still miffed his buddy was offered the Hermès invite-only leather seats. He wasn't, but, hey, it's OK.



It's great to have your own AgustaWestland AW139 helicopter, but how you 'trick it out' is key. Photo: arnd wiegmann/Reuters

Takeoff time is delayed, and the guy can't express his frustration or his wife will thrash him with her weighty chains. Agita reverberates inside him, so he takes some deep breaths.

It gets worse. He's supposed to be happy in his spanking-new marvel, but finally buckling up, what he sees out the window makes him blow his top. Just as the blades begin to whirl that rat-tat-tat beat, a rival hedgeie-bro has driven up to the heliport, mere seconds too late to see who owns the copter.

*Holly Peterson is a journalist and the author of six books, including the novel "It Happens in the Hamptons."*

*Photo illustration source images: Getty Images (3); Zuma Press (2); Alamy; EPA/Shutterstock*

Copyright ©2025 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.  
87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8

Appeared in the September 21, 2024, print edition as 'How the Super-Rich Signal Their Wealth to Each Other'.