

A Hotel of One's Own

IN SEARCH OF THE PRIVATE, THE INTIMATE, AND THE ENTIRELY BESPOKE, **SOPHY ROBERTS** GOES BEYOND THE BOUTIQUE HOTEL TO FIND NINE PERFECT BEDROOMS AROUND THE WORLD.

It was in pursuit of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* that I found myself in The Hague. The Vermeer painting hangs in the Mauritshuis, a little-visited museum that serves Dutch old masters in pleasantly digestible portions, with no queues, no bulletproof glass, and no tour groups gathered around handheld flags. The town is a peculiar mix, its pleasant canal-side streets removed from the horrors played out in The Hague's International Court of Justice. But if you're neither an attorney nor a felon visiting on business, The Hague presents itself as a picturesque provincial town, without the seediness of nearby Amsterdam. It is here, fittingly, that I chanced upon the most perfectly discreet, utterly luxurious place to stay: Haagsche Suites, a small townhouse retreat with just three rooms, recommended by a knowing Dutch friend. The cabbie struggled to find the address—it was difficult to describe this hybrid that is neither hotel nor private house, and the Haagsche is marked by only the most unassuming signage.



Haagsche Suites The Hague

Suite Z (above) is one of three in the 1890 townhouse owned by Irene (opposite) and Guido van den Elshout.

What makes this place so special stems from the growing frustrations of a frequent traveler. I've become more than a little jaded by repetition, bored even by the most nouvelle boutique hotels. I crave a sense of the personal, the indigenous, the home away from home. As clichéd as that sounds, my passion is shared by an increasing number of Americans who spend significant time away from the family bosom. Don't misunderstand: We all appreciate 24-hour room service, our bags carried, and a massage on call. But as the Florentine hotelier Leonardo Ferragamo explains, the hotel guest is purchasing not a pair of shoes but "the memory of an experience." It's a phrase that captures perfectly our complex, demanding, and overindulged expectations.

My memory of the Haagsche (pronounced HAHG-shuh) is precious. My host, Guido van den Elshout, a former international tax lawyer, took my coat as I entered an inimitably Dutch drawing room—dark, with shuttered windows, convex mirrors,



Residenza Napoleone III Rome

In a grand, old-world-Italian style, this private apartment is tucked into the Palazzo Ruspoli, just off the Via Condotti.



and old parquet floors reminiscent of a Vermeer canvas. There was no check-in, no forms to fill out, no credit cards to swipe. I was offered a glass of good wine to sip in front of the fireplace. I met his wife, Irene, who brought in a tray of toasted canapés. Guido recommended a local restaurant for dinner (to which he escorted me later that evening). He showed me where to find the Mauritshuis museum on a local map; Irene offered to drive me there the next morning. My suite, located on the third floor of this impeccably restored 1890 house—formerly home to an 89-year-old widow and her 26 cats—included a large bedroom, bathroom, sitting room, and kitchen. The private terrace overlooked a garden designed by Dutchman Dick Beijer that was modern, with square, slate-edged pools flanked by espaliered fruit trees. Snow dressed the topiary. The suite, with a fireplace of its own, was done in a palette of chocolate and cream, with layered textures of velvet, crocodile, Belgian linen, felt, marble, leather, tweed, and mahogany. Silver candelabra stood next to crystal decanters of whiskey and Grand Marnier; leather-bound books and 19th-century busts filled tall antique cabinets; the kitchen was stocked with wines (“a free maxi-bar,” says Guido, “we don’t charge for extras”). In the bathroom was a Hoesch “Zero” tub with silver holders for two champagne flutes (and a bottle sitting on ice). The whole place, designed by Dutch designers Martin de Boer and Gerda Rietveld, is the perfect cross between my two favorite hotels, London’s Berkeley and New York’s Carlyle—but cozier.

“I wanted to create a home, but something more dramatic than a home. It’s a difficult balance, but it’s what makes the difference,” says Guido, who has spent much of his professional life staying in some of the world’s best hotels. As a result, he is fanatical about details. “My wife was once charged for mints at Blakes in London. Nothing annoys me more. So we provide the small things, like dental floss. And guests respect that. They treat this like a private house. For instance, if they don’t drink the wine, they don’t then stuff it in their bag.” Irene interrupts: “The personal aspect is what matters most. Yet with the boom in five-star hotels, it’s the thing that disappears first.”

Indeed, I’m not used to a hotel owner’s serving breakfast, never mind scrambling the eggs himself. And what a feast this was, eaten in the kitchen-conservatory at a grand antique table with bowls of fresh blue hyacinths scenting the room, watched over by Guido’s forefathers who stare down from gilded frames. No, there’s no spa, but I’m here for Vermeer. No, dinner isn’t served, but if I want a sandwich, Guido can oblige. Besides, on city trips it’s rare that I dine in the same place where I stay. And I’d rather have Guido for a concierge than all the Swiss-trained pros at the grandest joint in town.

As unique as the Haagsche Suites is, the concept behind it is, thankfully, becoming less so. This new generation of what I see as sophisticated B&Bs offers a much-needed alternative to the ubiquitous luxury-hotel formula. “It’s about having a deeper experience of a destination, of living in it and grasping its spirit. In these places, the walls talk—which they just don’t in hotels,” says Claudia Borges da Fonseca, a veteran of the high-end travel business in Europe. “It’s also an inevitable trend, for it is human nature to look for the hidden thing. People are trying to find a different route to quality, which creates a more discerning, exploratory kind of travel. Call it travel’s haute couture.”

That’s a particularly apt metaphor, especially for Carla Sozzani’s

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the Via Condotti and fronting the elegant new Fendi store. Everything about the palazzo reeks of grandeur and style. Though there is a fax machine and Internet hookup, one comes here to immerse not in modernity but in times gone by. The furnishings and architecture are of museum quality—you are, after all, staying in the same apartment where Napoleon III is said to have stayed as a young man. But the experience is really about intimacy, thanks to the hostess, the Principessa Letizia Ruspoli. A woman of exquisite taste and generosity, Ruspoli lives one floor above (several of the noble Ruspoli families live throughout the Palazzo) and sees to everything, everything, her guests may need. Should you want a guide this morning? What about a tree decorated for your Christmas stay "just to make things a touch more homey?" she asks. No problem. Ring the buzzer at bedside and a butler—or more likely Letizia herself—will appear and wave her magic wand. ▶

I discovered the same intimate connection in Marrakech, with Ursula Haldimann, a former Swiss chocolatier who owns Riad Enija. She led me down the souk's narrow alleyways to her favorite artisans.

In Antigua, Guatemala, the former colonial capital, the handsome adventurer John Heaton owns one of the most perfect examples of the highly personal, sophisticated B&Bs. Quinta Maconda is a four-bedroom house brimming with elegantly Bohemian furnishings; its colonnaded balconies are twined with roses and wrapped around a fountain-filled courtyard. But the aesthetics are not all. "When you book into Quinta Maconda, you're not booking into a hotel. You're booking into an address book," Heaton says. His friends gave me rides in helicopters to remote highland villages. I met the curator of the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City, where I was led into storerooms stacked with row upon row of fabulous Mayan treasures, some too delicate to be publicly displayed. I met photographers, painters, and local carpet makers; talked about politics, anthropology, ecology, corruption, and Hollywood (there were more than a few salacious stories of famous friends who pass through town).

Heaton, like so many B&B owners, can provide this sort of hospitality—"the memory of an experience," in Ferragamo's words—because, simply put, he isn't in it just for the bottom line. His new class of owner-hosts aren't landlords so much as cultural philanthropists. Take Frédéric Coustols, a French financier who has sunk \$22 million into an extraordinary B&B in Lisbon called Palácio Belmonte. It has ten of the most exquisite suites in Europe perched atop a hill in the city's old town. The unmarked palace in the center of town has towers dating as far back as 123 B.C., Roman foundations, carved Visigoth pillars, seventh-century Moorish brick ceilings, contemporary black-veined marble bathrooms, and some 38,000 18th-century Portuguese tiles. On my visit, I wanted to ask how the costs of so lavish a restoration stack up against the room rates, but that seemed vulgar. Besides, Coustols answered my questions, albeit indirectly, with an explanation of his own: "I have traveled the world for fifteen years," he said. "Belmonte represents every luxury I didn't find. Principally peace. And beauty." ■

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