

how to find it

6 THE RIFT THAT HEALS

Lucia van der Post talks to Kuki Gallmann about her imperative to redefine the African wilderness



12 PAST MASTERS

Katrina Burroughs is in the frame when it comes to buying vintage sunglasses

14 CLONES OF CONTENTION

Sophy Roberts on what it takes to make a luxury hotel truly memorable

19 ECLECTIBLES

Philippa Clark is intent on serious shopping before five-star flopping

23 LOST SOLES ON THE SANDS

Nick Foulkes steps into the holiday shoes of five social stereotypes

26 INTO THE FORBIDDEN ZONE

Julian Allason on the peerless resorts replacing warring factions in Asia's Golden Triangle



23

33 THAT RIVA-ERA TOUCH

Alan Harper on the return of 1960s-style glamour to the boating world

36 THE BEACH IS BACK

Olivia Pomp has ways to keep up seaside sartorial standards

46 SEEING RED YET?

Jonathan Margolis rises to the challenge of "doing" the Aussie Outback in a day

49 THE SMOOTH GUIDE

Robert Nurden soaks up the new poise and panache of Bratislava

52 HIGH FIDELITY

Ned Denny ascends to India's sublime, tourist-free Himalayas

59 TECHNOPOLIS

Jonathan Margolis goes forth on his techie travels

61 WOULD YOU BELIZE IT?

Sue Clayton on why tiny Belize is a horn of plenty

66-70 ALL OVER THE SHOP

WRY SOCIETY THE CULT SHOP
E-NOUGH PRIVATE VIEWING
CONSUMING PASSIONS DETAILS
PLEASURE ZONE PERFECT WEEKEND

36



ISSUE 141 MAY 2005

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clones of contention

What makes a hotel truly memorable? Global five-star brands may offer exquisite design and immaculate service but do they have soul, asks Sophy Roberts.

On a recent visit to the Hague I booked into a three-room B&B called Haagsche Suites (pictured right), hidden in a quiet, residential enclave of this canal-webbed town. My room at the top of a classic 1890s townhouse occupied an entire floor featuring a large bedroom, bathroom, sitting room and separate kitchen, and a gorgeous balcony overlooking a peaceful garden with topiary and fruit trees. The detail was to die for, with texture upon texture of Belgian linens, felts and leathers in chocolates and creams dressed with silver, crystal and 19th century busts. Everything was in place, including easy internet access and a bar stocked with full-size bottles of wine.

family-owned properties just haven't the money to keep up. You can be sure they'll disappear."

Does this mean a world of €300-a-night clones, of Molton Brown bathroom amenities and Epsa spas, of Ducasse hotel restaurants and Frette linen sheets? It is a potentially dull projection that requires global five-star hotel brands to deliver at an even higher level. We're talking about service – on this, Oberoi is a leader – and soul, which is ephemeral, complex and often indefinable. A hotel also needs to relate to its context (have we not outgrown that late-1990s impulse to build Asian-style hotels 10,000 miles west of Bali?).

"If you think of a legendary hotel in any city, it is always embraced by the local community. That's why brands can't

have a cookie-cutter approach; the property won't have durability; it must be a reflection of the place in which it is located," says Edouard Etteggui, group chief executive of Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, whose current portfolio of 21 properties is extending from New York, London and Hong Kong (what Etteggui calls "brand-defining cities") to include Tokyo and Prague by 2006.

Indeed, only when all these aspects fall into place – service, soul and a respect for context – does a potentially good hotel become something great. "It's why I launched *Nota bene*," says Anthony Lattman, publisher of

the subscription-based upscale travel guides with a no-holds-barred approach to reviewing. "With all the big brands pushing their products so hard, somebody needed to cut through it all to find properties that deliver the X-factor." His favourites? Villa Feltrinelli on Lake Garda, Las Alamedas on Mexico's Costa Carey, and Le Cap Estel Hotel on the Côte d'Azur – not one of them, interestingly, part of a luxury group.

"I watch new hotel brands copy the rubric, rather than the heart," says Isadore Sharp, founder, chairman and CEO of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, which currently operates 65 hotels worldwide with 19 under construction. "Luxury isn't about diamond jewellery any more. What makes life better for me and my kids each day? The life experience. That's what counts." His remark highlights an innate contradiction in the hotel business and one that all the big brands have now to address: they promise guests a unique experience at each property but their hands are tied by commercial economies of scale (one training programme, one spa contract, one marketing machine).

Take Oberoi as an example. On one level, Oberoi's properties are all different. The Oberoi Vanyavilas is the tented camp in Rajasthan's Ranthambore Park. It has a specific look and feel. It is unlike his palace



Savoy, Florence (Forie)



de Massis, Rome (Forie)



Astoria, St. Petersburg (Forie)

its contents factored into the room price. In the bathroom, as well as the usual miniatures there were also plasters, dental floss and painkillers. I thought this was great – I long for the day when a hotel leaves a sign on the bathrobe saying, "Take me. You paid enough for the room" – and I liked the sense of brio. Service hit the perfect pitch, with no small talk, except on my terms. The owners, Guido and Irene van den Elabout, spoke of their frustration with the bland repetition during a lifetime of travel; she is a former radiographer, he works as an international tax lawyer.

I long for Haagsche Suites' philosophy of individuality to spread to every city in the world (it's getting there in northern Europe, with a spate of upmarket residences opening in recent months, including Maison Le Dragon and De Brugsche Suites in Bruges, Park Tower Suite in Haarlem, Lute Suites in Amsterdam, and Azzedine Alala's 5 Rue de Moussy in Paris). But the current trend in the luxury hotel industry speaks otherwise, according to Biki Oberoi, whose Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, founded by his father in 1934, now has 11 properties in India, with resorts in Egypt, Mauritius and Indonesia. "Family-run hotels are becoming a thing of the past. Marketing has become so important that individual,

Wide picture: Haagsche Suites in the Hague – a one-off wonder; narrow: similar styles of hotel room in three different cities.

hotels, The Oberoi Udaivilas in Udaipur and The Oberoi Rajvillas in Jaipur, which are nothing like his city hotels in New Delhi and Mumbai (note this current trend to affix the brand name to every property – it's beautifully ironic when you're talking about the One&Only properties). But there are common details – for instance, "Banyan Tree" spa menus and common bathroom amenities that speak subliminally of a streamlined brand.

Don't get me wrong, I like Oberoi – the properties I have experienced (all of the above) are great if you don't want to run a risk in a country that's historically viewed as "hard" (had food hygiene, for instance). Consistency is one thing, yet surely hotels must also inspire? And that is where Oberoi faces more formidable competition. I give you Samode Havelli in Jaipur, with a higgeldy-piggeldy suite wrapped in coloured glass. Or Devi Garh, outside Udaipur, where original flaking murals on the fort's 18th century walls speak of a specific and compelling history, as do the former elephant stables in the grounds.

"When I'm travelling for business, I want reliability and facilities that won't go wrong. These requirements are usually best served by big brands and often booked according to company travel policy," says Alexander Ballock, a frequent traveller and director of Propbet, the international brand consultancy. "But for holidays, everything changes. I'm suspicious if it's a brand I recognise. I want something different from the mass-produced experience of my working week. I want it to be memorable. I know these hotels are difficult to find out about. But if they've been recommended by someone I like, they've got much more power than the brand everyone knows. It doesn't matter if it's a car or a hotel: in branding, word of mouth is every one's Holy Grail."

Indeed, it was a friend who told me about one of the best small hotels I've come across – Klein Genot in Franschhoek, South Africa. It has only six rooms, a small spa (perfection), a turquoise pool (heaven), and a clutch of Malawian staff who make this place exceptional. The



Individual flair prevails at Amsterdam's Lute Suites.

turnout, it's not the usual rose petals strewn around my head but crushed mint and lavender on antique linen pillow slips. My private drawing room and dining room are every bit the real Renaissance palace, and breakfast is supreme, with goblets of sweet orange juice and the family's silver bowls overflowing with homemade jams.

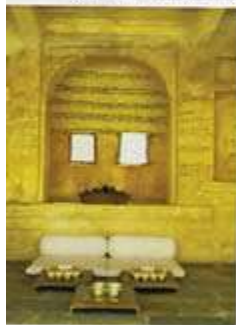
After this kind of experience, Rocco Forte's Hotel de Russie can't compete. Yes, his hotels are among the most reliable in Europe, but after Napoleon III, there's something about a Rocco room in Rome that reminds me of a Rocco room in Florence, St Petersburg or Cardiff. Perhaps it's the fact that his entire stable is designed by one person – with an economically sensible tendency towards repetition

sincerity of the people serving you – and that can't be cloned." By my experience, he's right. Yes, the marble bathrooms and walk-in closets are a Four Seasons trademark. Yes, these aspects smack of subliminal formulas shared by nearly all luxury hotel brands. But by making your stay so smooth it's perfect, you're given something precious – head space, which only a complete suspension of responsibility can allow.

For good service is the crux that luxury fashion houses would do well to heed as an increasing number "collaborate" with luxury hotel companies (Bulgari with Marriott, Armani with Dubai-based EMAAR properties, and Cerruti with Belgium-based Rezidor SAS). They should also hold on to a sense of the inimitable, for unlike handbags, you can't change the look twice a year when the high street catches on. "We've gone into a complete reversal of that 1990s obsession with the *pièce de jour*, whether it's Gucci, Prada or Christian Dior," says Lassman. "People don't want to spend £1,000 on a piece of clothing that makes them look like a clone. It's a reflection of an unimaginative personality. For exactly the same reason, a growing number of us don't want to stay in branded hotels just because of the luxury name. Like a piece of vintage, we all want to find the one-off that gives the rush of adrenaline to the head." Big brand hoteliers will try and tell us otherwise, but from a traveller's point of view, I hope it's Lassman who is right. *

HOTEL SUITE HOMES

5 Rue de Moisson, Paris, France (00331-4478 9200). **Los Alamos**, Costa Carveles, Mexico (0052222-285 5500). www.losalamos.com. **De Brughe Suites**, Koningin Elisabethlaan 20, Bruges, Belgium (0032473-803 153). www.brughesuites.be. **Le Cap Hotel**, 1312 Avenue Raymond Poincaré, Est-Bord-de-mer, France (003334-9376 2929). www.capehotel.com. **Devi Garh**, Village Dewaras, Rajasthan, India (0091-2953 289211). www.devigarh.com. **Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts**, 00800-6488 6488. www.fourseasons.com. **Grand Hotel a Villa Feltrinelli**, Via Rimenbranza 38-40, Gargnano, Italy (0039365-798 000). [www.villafeltrinelli.com. **Haagse Suites**, Laan van Meerdervoort 155, The Hague, The Netherlands \(003170-364 7879\). \[www.haagsesuites.nl\]\(http://www.haagsesuites.nl\). **Hudson Hotel**, 356 West 58th Street, New York \(001212-554 6000\). \[www.hudsonhotel.com\]\(http://www.hudsonhotel.com\). **Hotel Tresanton**, St Mawes, Cornwall \(01326-270 055\). \[www.tresanton.com\]\(http://www.tresanton.com\). **Klein Genot**, Franschhoek, South Africa \(002721-876 2738\). \[www.kleingenot.com\]\(http://www.kleingenot.com\). **Lute Suites**, Amstelplein 24d 54-58, Amsterdam, The Netherlands \(003120-472 2462\). \[www.lutesuites.com\]\(http://www.lutesuites.com\). **Maison Le Dragon**, Eekhoutstraat 5, Bruges, Belgium \(003250-720 654\). \[www.maisonledragon.be\]\(http://www.maisonledragon.be\). **Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group**, 00800-2828 3838. \[www.mandarinoriental.com\]\(http://www.mandarinoriental.com\). **Nota Bene**, stockists and subscriptions 0870-240 4089. \[www.notabene.com\]\(http://www.notabene.com\). **Oberoi Hotels & Resorts**, 00800-1234 0101. \[www.oberoihotels.com\]\(http://www.oberoihotels.com\). **Park Tower Suite**, Filipsplein 11, Haarlem, The Netherlands \(003123-534 777\). \[www.parktower.com\]\(http://www.parktower.com\). **La Residenza Napoleone III**, Largo Goldoni 56, Rome, Italy \(007547-733 7098\). \[www.residenza-napoleone.com\]\(http://www.residenza-napoleone.com\). **Rocco Forte Hotels**, 0870-660 7040. \[www.roccofortehotels.com\]\(http://www.roccofortehotels.com\). **Samode Havelli**, Gangapole Subhash Chowk, Jaipur, India \(0091145-263 2402\). \[www.samode.com\]\(http://www.samode.com\).](http://www.villafeltrinelli.com)



detail is painstakingly accurate, and the décor an eclectic mix of clean summer colours, plump sofas and Toile de Jouy cottons. What makes it so successful? Its unpretentious personality and obsession with good service. And, to be honest, the fact that I found it on the grapevine. For even if it's hotels you're into rather than soft adventure, there is still an essential impulse shared by every kind of traveller: that sense of discovery, of finding a place others haven't heard about.

In South Africa, it's perhaps easier to uncover a little known gem than somewhere like Rome, which is so heavily visited you wonder if there are any secrets left. So you can imagine the thrill of coming across La Residenza Napoleone III, a one-suite apartment just off Rome's Via Condotti. It occupies a 16th century palace. Your host is its owner, Principessa Letizia Ruspoli, who makes it her personal business to hook you into the perfect trattoria. Throughout my stay, I am looked after by her invisible maid and butler. The bedroom is sexy in the extreme, draped in silks. There's a projection screen for DVDs hidden behind a huge 17th century oil (the Sotheby's-worthy collection includes tapestries and sculptures). With

after the first formula proved such a runaway success (the designer, Olga Polizzi, can also create original looks; her own hotel, Tresanton in Cornwall, is Britain's best example of luxury on the seaside, while her newest property, Eddleigh House in Devon, will offer a fresh take on the country house tradition by combining classic with contemporary details when it opens this August).

Of course, it is a fair temptation to use the same successful ingredients with the opening of each new property. Besides, if the service is exceptional, the hotel seduces us with something more meaningful than its physical being, something that makes us think each experience unique (the inverse is represented by Schragger's Hudson Hotel in New York – fantastic looking, and designed by Philippe Starck – but service was so poor I had no reserves left to forgive the queues at check-in and check-out, or his model-handsome staff. That was four years ago, and I've never done a Schragger since). Four Seasons is another to recommend. "We've been the first at lots of things," says Sharp. "The first to put shampoo in the bathroom, the first to put a minibar in the suite. But that isn't what makes Four Seasons different. It's the

Above, from left: **Devi Garh** near Udaipur, India; **La Residenza Napoleone III**, just off Rome's Via Condotti; **Klein Genot** in Franschhoek, South Africa.