



# Setting the Scene

Décor and design are not the only considerations when appealing to trendy guests. Getting your furniture spot on can also pave the way to the perfect stay

The boutique hotel, a concept that was originally popularised in the USA, is now a favourite go-to for holiday-makers seeking a unique and stylised stay. This conceptual idea that mingles sophistication and elegance with an intimate surround has brought with it an eye for design that is filtering through the hotel market. "Once upon a time, hotel furnishings didn't feature too highly on a holiday-maker's wish list. As long as the hotel was clean and comfortable, the average guest wasn't bothered about the colour of the curtains or the thread count of the cotton sheets," says Juliette Thomas, founder of Juliette's Interiors, the leading designer of superior French furniture and mirrors. "That's all changed and today people are interested in how their hotel of choice is decorated and furnished...witness the rise and rise of the boutique hotel."

Ms Thomas explains how these days hotels need a bespoke solution that suits a corporate identity that simultaneously creates a visually eye catching interior. "Of course, the term 'boutique hotel' has become a bit elasticated," she points out. "I've seen some 50-bedroom hotels thus described because the owners knew it suggests there is

something special on offer - usually the décor."

### Getting It Right

So, what really gives a hotel boutique status? "Nothing overly quirky. The key is neutral décor which can be imaginatively customised to produce an elegant or glamorous feel," says Ms Thomas. "Successful boutique hotels feature an eye-catching mix of old and new, coupled with vintage and modern. Victorian-style roll top baths or sumptuous

bat-shaped tubs in an ultra smart, glitteringly clean-lined bathroom, for example, or a little bit of French Louis combined with acrylic. The overall challenge is to avoid achieving a triumph of design over substance." With that in mind, practicality should never be forgotten; guests need somewhere decent to hang their designer clothes and a desk to place their toiletries. "A French-style armoire is such a good idea

because it will provide a practical yet visual treat rather than relying on a utilitarian fitted wardrobe," suggests Ms Thomas. "Chevets, or curvy-legged bedside tables add to the charm. And a full-length mirror is an absolute essential in the bedroom. As for room lighting - what about a crystal chandelier? Nothing overwhelming, just something sizeable enough to make an impact."

"Over the last decade, we've designed and supplied our bespoke furniture to a variety of leading London hotels, ranging from landmarks such as Claridges, The Connaught and Athenaeum, to more discreet, boutique locations including One Aldwych and Dukes. Trends have come and gone, but we're now seeing a real convergence in approach between the hotels at the top end of the market," says Ben de Groot, founder of Ben Whistler, a maker of classic and contemporary furniture. "The Diane Von Furstenberg suites and rooms at Claridges marked a return to the designer suite, and also a real standard in terms of an individual feel and insistence on quality. We're also noticing a movement away from the minimalist furniture so prevalent in the 90s, to customised pieces that combine style and welcoming comfort. In essence, we're seeing a marked shift towards hotels creating the ultimate home setting by providing a space where guests can feel completely relaxed and at ease," he reveals.

### Spend More

High-end hoteliers are increasingly recognising the long-term benefits of investing in quality, handmade furniture. Design, and the furniture that comes with it, is as much a deciding factor in the success of a hotel as the service. In fact, in the modern age, word of mouth is more important than ever, and social networks now mean thousands of people know in an instant about somebody's uncomfortable night's sleep!

"Luxury boutique hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray is fastidious in his attention to detail on furniture," says Mr de Groot. "In recent projects he frequently visited our London workshops to discuss and specify the perfect seats. This ensured the months he spent on designing rooms and perfecting service weren't undone by a lumpy chair or a broken sofa.

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"To this end, we've recently launched a diffusion range of furniture in collaboration with GP & J Baker. This combines the style and quality of its Threads range with a few of the recurring themes in furniture. They reflect the many schools of design that have influenced the capital's rich style heritage, ranging from Art Deco and Edwardian, to Bauhaus and even Regency. The belief in well-made, beautifully designed yet

supremely comfortable luxury hotel furniture that makes you feel at home is most definitely here to stay," he adds.

Prapai Sairien, a design consultant for SOTO based in Chiang Mai Thailand who works with hoteliers, interior designers and customers across the UK, believes that despite the difficulties felt during the recession, refurbishment and updates are absolutely vital. "The main difference we are noticing at SOTO is that hoteliers are moving away from purchasing mass-produced items of furniture or those of a lower quality, to investing in statement and timeless pieces. The trend is to replace impersonal reception desks, bedroom desks and tables etc., with hand-crafted or antique pieces that not only provide a clear statement of quality and differentiation, but also retain their value as an asset."

SOTO's furniture can be customised to suit each individual client or property, with an emphasis on creating beautiful, environmentally-friendly pieces. "We have worked with Malmaison, Hotel du Vin and Four Seasons, amongst others, to incorporate our furniture into their hotel designs. Each piece will not only be fit for purpose, but will also keep its value and remain timeless," continues Mr Sairien. "My advice to any hotelier that needs to invest in new furniture, is to buy pieces that are not only timeless, but will allow you to differentiate your hotel from those that are unwilling to make the investment. Choose simple pieces that are well made, are fit for function but not necessarily tied to working within a hotel setting. That way they will last longer and can be refurbished to retain their value."

"Renovation is the affordable and eco-friendly option for hoteliers," agrees Mike Callaway of Bury-based refurbishment company Office Chair Renovation Limited. "In today's climate everyone is looking at ways to save money

without compromising on service and quality. For hotels, giving customers a positive experience has never been so important - just one dubious online review can send an establishment's reputation plummeting."

### Ways to Refresh

Furniture plays a major role in a customer's overall impression of a hotel, helping to create an ambiance and identity. "It needs to look and feel just right - and when it comes to updating furniture, hoteliers would be smart to opt for renovation over replacement," suggests Mr Callaway.

"Replacing hotel furniture can be extremely expensive. Factor in the sheer volume of chairs and tables needed for the restaurant, bar, reception areas, bedrooms, suites and additional conference rooms, and it really starts to add up." Updating what you already have means you avoid any hidden extras, like the cost of disposing of old furniture. "This can be expensive, and may not be something you budgeted for in your original plans," continues Mr Callaway. "We offer flexible furniture refurbishment services - with a huge choice of colours, fabrics and designs. You can find the ideal combination to inject style into a tired hotel suite, restaurant or meeting room."

Of course, one of the major reasons to choose renovation is its effect on the environment. Creating new furniture usually demands the use of raw materials, not to mention the environmental implications of the machinery and transportation involved in the process. Transforming your existing furniture is kinder to the environment and significantly reduces waste. Concludes Mr Callaway, "Giving your existing furniture a makeover can prove to be much cheaper than buying new - sometimes saving around 70% of the cost - it's the savvy choice for today's hoteliers."



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