



# Rooms on top

The shortlist for this year's Best Urban Hotels, and the high and frequent flyers tasked with picking the winners

PHOTOGRAPHY: KENT ANDREASEN WRITER: DAVEN WU

This April, Adrian Zecha, the legendary founder of the Aman Resorts group, quietly launched his new brand Azerai in the Laotian city of Luang Prabang. At first blush, the hotel is a stark contrast for the veteran hotelier, with twice as many rooms, each a third the size, and starting rates at least a third of the average Aman hotel. Yet Zecha says his latest venture is not a departure from the Aman model, but a different incarnation of the same ideal of good taste and restrained aesthetics. 'It's affordable luxury,' he insists.

Zecha's comment is an interesting one, particularly as Azerai arrives at a time when urban travellers are expressing a preference for experiences that extend beyond a 60 sq m suite, standardised check-in times and an indifferently-stocked bar fridge. And hotels are responding.

For Duncan Palmer, managing director of The Murray in Hong Kong, designed by Foster and Partners, affordable luxury, in the context of urban hotels, is a relative and individualised concept. What's important is that it avoids passing fads, opting instead for 'longevity in the interior design, which can be interpreted in the placement of art, selection of day and night uniforms, and choice of furniture, right down to the music, scent and the behaviour of staff.'

Take, for example, the Moxy Times Square hotel in New York, with slick interiors by Yabu Pushelberg and Rockwell Group – it features foldaway furniture that can be reconfigured by guests as required, while in-house diversions range from burlesque shows, tarot card readings and lip sync battles to acupuncture happy hour, mini massages and nail tattoos. Room rates start at \$139, a startling price point in a city where a hotel with a comparable pedigree kicks off at \$400.

The newly-minted Tribe hotel in Perth, meanwhile, passes onto guests the cost savings gained from a more efficient modular construction method, its marketing tagline

of 'accessible luxury' defined by on-demand movies, spacious rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Kings Park, and upscale furnishings.

As Vicki Poulos, Moxy Hotels' senior global brand director, points out, the modern ideal of the urban hotel blurs the lines between private, social and communal spaces. 'The word "luxury" is used everywhere today. But what creates it is the uniqueness of a product and the emotional response to it. Today's traveller is looking for a hotel that is thoughtfully designed, has its own unique character, and inspires guests through art, design, entertainment and gastronomy. That's luxury.' In other words, the very qualities that sharing economy platforms like Airbnb cannot offer, especially when one adds the layer of affordability.

'This is the future,' predicts Ian Schrager, another legendary hotelier who is also bent on redefining the urban hotel model. His latest offering, Public in New York, is another salvo in his crusade, begun with his Edition brand, to democratise luxury with 'lots of originality, fun and unique experiences'. This comes in the form of elegant rooms dressed by Molteni & C, easy-on-the-wallet meals at Jean-Georges Vongerichten eateries, and a basement entertainment space for screenings, blow-out dance parties, and comedy shows. 'People want good value for money,' says Schrager. 'Your whole night is complete without ever having to leave the place.'

It's a sentiment we share as we continue to scour the world for the stuff that refines you. As ever, our annual survey of the Best Urban Hotels casts a wide net, pulling in the properties that have caught our attention over the past year. We invited an expert panel of judges, each an experienced traveller, to cast their unsparing, critical eyes over the hotels – previewed in the following pages – that are rethinking how hotels work. The winners will be announced in our January issue (on sale 14 December). >>

ENTREPRENEUR MANDLA  
SIBEKO (SEE PAGE 194)  
AT THE CIRCA GALLERY  
IN JOHANNESBURG





**Frederik Bille Brahe** ^  
Chef and restaurateur, Copenhagen

The combined successes of Café Atelier September, which serves up Copenhagen's most sought-after avocado toast, and Apollo, a new bar and canteen at the Kunsthall Charlottenborg (W\*222), have put Frederik Bille Brahe at the forefront of Denmark's culinary scene. With his effortlessly cool restaurant interiors, avowed passion for art and design, and a collaboration with Hay on a kitchenware collection, the chef has also become an integral part of the city's creative landscape. Behind all this activity is a desire 'to create meaning for people,

to provide them with energy, and nourish their intellect,' explains Bille Brahe with characteristic modesty. He hits the road often for brief stints at overseas restaurants or in search of inspiration, spending the most time in New York, Tokyo and Paris, and favouring hotels that prioritise comfort and service. 'A hotel experience for me should be like a home away from home.' **TF Chan**

**69,000 miles flown per year**  
**38 trips taken per year**  
**25 hotels visited per year**



**Mandla Sibeko** (previous page)  
Founder and chairman of Seed Capital Ventures and director of FNB Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg

To say that Johannesburg-born Sibeko is accomplished is to understate matters. At just 24, he'd already set up his first company, Born Free Media, which specialises in content and multimedia. This soon led to several key investments in food, retail and clothing alongside initiatives that empower young South Africans. He has championed the local art scene, including the FNB Joburg Art Fair and the Sanlam Handmade Contemporary Fair. 'My mission is to get people from all over the world to come and experience the exciting contemporary art culture that Johannesburg has developed and pioneered for the rest of Africa.' Unsurprisingly, Sibeko's diverse portfolio – which includes the launch this year of an urban city renewal project in Johannesburg – involves extensive travelling. 'I spend far more money on travel than anything else,' he says, adding a preference for a good location and service as found at Durban's Oyster Box and Paris' La Maison Champs Élysées, designed by Maison Martin Margiela. **Daven Wu**

**80,000 miles flown per year**  
**16 trips taken per year**  
**17 hotels visited per year**

**Sofia Sanchez de Betak** >  
Influencer, Buenos Aires

It's difficult to pin down exactly what Sofia Sanchez de Betak does. Art director, fashion consultant, designer, red carpet staple, brand ambassador and author, she is probably best summed up by that nebulous contemporary catch-all, 'influencer'. Her lifestyle is equally cosmopolitan, split between her native Argentina, New York and Europe, with frequent jaunts elsewhere. Always on the move, it's no surprise that Sanchez de Betak – Chufy to her legions of followers – values spaces that retain their individuality over cookie-cutter experiences, hence her choice of breakfast at Hazz in Istanbul as one of her most memorable hotel experiences. Ever in search of a new project, a recent visit to Nairobi left her feeling that Kenya's capital deserved an excellent urban hotel of its own. A few ideas have already crossed her mind. 'I would do a charming, small boutique hotel, and a traditional colonial residence,' she says. World, watch this space. **Warren Singh-Bartlett**

**80,000 miles flown per year**  
**30 trips taken per year**  
**36 hotels visited per year**

## Hotel Awards

THIS PAGE, INFLUENCER  
SOFIA SANCHEZ DE BETAK  
IN THE BLOND BAR AT  
11 HOWARD IN NEW YORK  
OPPOSITE, CHEF FREDRIK  
BILLE BRAHE AT APOLLO,  
HIS RESTAURANT AT  
COPENHAGEN'S KUNSTHAL  
CHARLOTTENBORG







**Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn**  
Gallerist, New York

As the founder of Salon 94, one of New York's most dynamic art galleries, Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn is used to pushing boundaries. Since its founding in 2002, Salon 94 has been located in a dedicated project space within her Rafael Viñoly-designed townhouse on the Upper East Side, and it has served as a backdrop for artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Carlo Mollino, Rick Owens and Alexander Calder. Bringing together fine art, contemporary design and ceramics in a shared context, Greenberg Rohatyn's trailblazing point of view has not only led to the opening of the gallery's Freeman Alley (2007) and Bowery (2010) locations, both on the Lower East Side, but also a dedicated design arm, Salon 94 Design, launched in March this year in partnership with dealer Paul Johnson, of Johnson Trading Gallery. Suffice to say, Greenberg Rohatyn travels a lot. Logging about 100,000 air miles each year on trips to art fairs, studio visits with artists, and museums, Greenberg Rohatyn regularly travels all over North and South America, Europe and Asia. And while she does enjoy boutique hotels with character and a well-conceived design, she's still loyal to a few classic grand hotels, like Claridge's in London, where the concierge service and finishing touches are second to none. **Pei-Ru Keh**

**100,000 miles flown per year**  
**30 trips taken per year**  
**30 hotels visited per year**



GALLERIST JEANNE GREENBERG ROHATYN AT HER RAFAEL VIÑOLY-DESIGNED TOWNHOUSE ON NEW YORK'S UPPER EAST SIDE



DEVELOPER SORAPOJ  
TECHAKRAISRI IN THE DAVID  
COLLINS STUDIO-DESIGNED  
RITZ-CARLTON RESIDENCES,  
LOCATED IN BANGKOK'S  
MAHANAKHON TOWER

## THE 41 CONTENDERS, FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE

### Africa

L'Hôtel, Marrakech, Morocco  
The Silo, Cape Town, South Africa

### Asia + Oceania

The Johnson, Brisbane, Australia  
Chao, Beijing, China  
Kerry Hotel, Hong Kong, China  
Wheat Youth Arts Hotel,  
Hangzhou, China  
Four Seasons, Kyoto, Japan  
Hoshinoya, Tokyo, Japan  
The Warehouse Hotel, Singapore  
Park Hyatt, Bangkok, Thailand

### Europe

Hotel Danmark, Copenhagen, Denmark  
Nolinski, Paris, France  
Mauritzhof, Münster, Germany  
Ion City Hotel, Reykjavik, Iceland  
Zander K, Bergen, Norway  
Santa Clara 1728, Lisbon, Portugal  
Barceló Torre de Madrid, Madrid, Spain  
The One, Barcelona, Spain  
At Six, Stockholm, Sweden  
Four Seasons Hotel at Ten Trinity  
Square, London, UK  
Henrietta Hotel, London, UK  
Nobu Hotel Shoreditch, London, UK  
The Ned, London, UK

### Latin America

Emiliano, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Gran Meliá, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
AC Hotel, Guadalajara, Mexico

### Middle East

The Poli House, Tel Aviv, Israel  
Assila, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

### North America

Andaz, Ottawa, Canada  
The Robey, Chicago, US  
Nobu Ryokan, Malibu, US  
Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club,  
Miami, US  
Ace Hotel, New Orleans, US  
1 Hotel Brooklyn Bridge, New York, US  
Public, New York, US  
The Beekman, New York, US  
The Line DC, Washington DC, US

### Renovations

The Peninsula, Beijing, China  
The David Citadel, Jerusalem, Israel  
Hotel Eden, Rome, Italy  
The Strand, Yangon, Myanmar



**Sorapoj Techakraisri** ^  
CEO, Pace Development Corporation

It's hardly hyperbole to note that real estate is in Techakraisri's blood, though he and his brother Chotipol have, through their Bangkok-based Pace Development, ratcheted up their family's real estate development profile by several notches. In addition to overseeing a pair of condos and resort projects in Hokkaido, and a country club and villas in Hua Hin, the 39-year-old property tycoon is particularly bullish in Bangkok, where he's just topped out his biggest bet, the \$600m MahaNakhon, a 77-storey pixellated skyscraper and Thailand's tallest tower, designed by one Ole Scheeren. The scale of Pace's portfolio requires constant travel, especially to New York where Techakraisri is again working with Scheeren, this time

on a revamped retail concept for upmarket US grocery Dean & DeLuca, which he acquired in 2014 for a cool \$140m. And what's his preferred accommodation on the road? 'An urban hotel in a prime location, in a mixed-use development with easy access to services and major roads,' he says, citing The London Edition, Aman Tokyo and the Crosby Street Hotel in New York as exemplars of that model. DW

**184,000 miles flown per year**  
**20 trips taken per year**  
**23 hotels visited per year**





ARCHITECT KEDEM  
SHINAR AT HER HOUSE  
IN TEL AVIV



### **Kedem Shinar <** **Architect, Tel Aviv**

Born in Tel Aviv, brought up in Boston, and a graduate of Tokyo's Musashino Art University, Kedem Shinar is at home in many cultures. The daughter of architect Ami Shinar, with whom she collaborated on the neo-brutalist Sderot train station, Shinar worked with Toyo Ito and Kengo Kuma before returning to Israel. Founding her studio in 2013, she recently made waves with the CY House, a simple yet sophisticated project on a lush garden plot located in the village of Carmey Yosef in the Jerusalem Hills. Drawing upon the design traditions of the Bauhaus, Japan and De Stijl, the house's massive windows blur the lines between inside and out. Shinar believes that a great hotel must balance service and value, but that a sense of place is paramount, and she cites Venice's Flora as a favourite. 'I'm not interested in visiting a hotel that looks just like another,' she says. 'I'm able to forgive anything when I feel like I'm immersed in a place of charm and beauty.' **WSB**

**30,000 miles flown per year**  
**10 trips taken per year**  
**8 hotels visited per year**