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Hotel interiors

Whispered luxury

Who needs gold, marble and old-school opulence? These days, discerning boutique hotel designers opt for simplicity and understated elegance, convinced that sparingly used quality materials beat glitz and glamour, says **Clare Dowdy**

'LUXURIOUS and ornate, combining the height of opulence with an overwhelming sense of tradition.' This may sound like a pretty standard description of a five-star (or more) hotel, but in the European hotel industry at least, 'luxury' is busy redefining itself. Some new top-end hotels are going for a much less overt positioning, with design cues to match.

In luxury-laden Dubai, this somewhat old-school version of luxury reigns on. The 'height of opulence' description above is used by the multiple-starred Madinat Jumeirah. Not only does it seem out of date, but its interpretation jars with many Western consumers more comfortable with tasteful simplicity. Every evening at the Madinat Jumeirah a snow-white bath towel is fashioned, origami-style, into a different

animal, complete with stick-on eyes, and positioned on the four-pillowed, six-cushioned bed. This sums up one type of luxury to a tee: labour-intensive, superfluous and short-lived.

In Europe, designers are championing a different take on luxury. Rather than the number of cushions on the bed, it's about the quality of materials and finishes, and allowing bespoke or carefully chosen items space to breathe.

New-builds, such as the Vincent Hotel in Southport, Cliff House Hotel in Cork and Cornwall's St Moritz, also recognise the need for design to create a sense of being well-established. All three are examples of more subtle, home-like destinations, where 'luxury' is whispered rather than belloved.

St Moritz, Cornwall, by Absolute

There had been a previous hotel on the St Moritz site, and Absolute was tasked with recreating the 1930s sophistication of the original. 'We concentrated on the furniture, acquiring vintage pieces from that time and mixing it with contemporary elements,' says Absolute's creative director of interiors, Steve Coombe. 'We wanted everything to look solidly built, as if it had been there for a long time.'

The result includes 20 leather 1930s armchairs that have been restored for the reception area. The reception desk itself, designed by Absolute, is a more modern affair – a white floating slab whose front is illuminated. Meanwhile, a 1930s vanity unit has been updated with a paint effect – no shabby chic here – and stands in the wine section, and the upstairs bar is decked out with contemporary sofas from Meridiani.

The 48-room hotel, which brothers Hugh and Steve Ridgway opened last November, is applying for five-star status. 'Even in the luxury market, excess is not always best,' says Coombe. 'If you've got a bespoke bed in the room, don't crowd it with things, it needs air to breathe in.'



1 The reception at the St Moritz Hotel in Cornwall features restored 1930s leather armchairs

2 The 1930s-influenced atrium at the St Moritz Hotel

3 One of the St Moritz Hotel's simply designed rooms

4 Floating ceramic Teapot lights in the V-deli at the Vincent Hotel, Southport

5 Bar furniture at the Cliff House Hotel in Ireland features tweeds and tartans

6 The pool at the Cliff House Hotel

7 Layered slate has been used in the bathrooms at Cliff House Hotel

8 Stone gives a natural look to Cliff House Hotel's dining room

9 The suites at Cliff House Hotel have a relaxed feel



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Vincent Hotel, Southport, by DesignLSM

Custom-made is the buzzword at the Vincent Hotel, from the Japanese-style soaking tubs (baths are a five-star musts-have) to the 2m-wide sliding screens in front of the windows. 'Clients like the idea of glamour, and we tried to do it in a pared-down way,' says DesignLSM senior designer Clare Devlin.

'People's expectations are a lot higher in terms of luxury,' says Devlin about the 60-bedroom hotel that was opened this summer by local entrepreneur Paul Adam. 'Now the finishes and details need to be less obvious, more adventurous and experimental.' This translates into angora and lambswool bed throws, along with the grey velvet, green-lined curtains in front of the wardrobes.

In the hotel's most casual space, the V-Deli, the fridge doors are finished in copper, illuminated by a flock of floating ceramic Teapot lights by Original BTC. Next, DesignLSM is turning its attention to another new hotel, the four-star Runnymede Hotel in Egham, Surrey, which is due to open next year.



Cliff House Hotel, West Waterford, Ireland, by Douglas Wallace

Conceived as a boutique five-star hotel, Cliff House Hotel's luxury status has as much to do with its location – the coastal village of Ardmore – as its design. 'It's in the middle of nowhere, so it appeals to anyone who wants to get away from everything,' says Douglas Wallace creative director Garry Cohn. 'There's the feeling that visitors could do anything, or could do nothing.'

Rather than disrupting the village, the 39-room hotel, which is owned by Barry and Gerri O'Callaghan and opened in April, is 'snuggled on the side of the cliff', according to Cohn, who has used natural, contemporary materials in abundance. The stonework of the exterior is continued inside, with layered slate featuring in the bathrooms. This is contrasted with rich wall coverings and lush carpets, Cohn adds. 'We've added pieces that make you feel at home like tweeds, tartans and linens, and lots of mood lighting.'

To give this new-build a sense of continuity, Douglas Wallace turned to London antique dealers to source Campaign or English colonial furniture, in solid oak. 'With luxury ten years ago, things became a bit too plastic,' Cohn believes. 'But if you think about a hotel as if it's yours, you don't want all that. It contributes to your mood when you have less stuff around you.'



