

# LUSO

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luxury lifestyle magazine

## REFRESH

Spring fever takes hold as we search for the brightest and boldest across the globe from Thailand to the Lake District



### DARK NIGHTS

We investigate Gotham's finest design hotels

### SPIN CYCLE

We see if custom race bikes can keep their performance promises

### NORTHERN SOUL

It's off to Cumbria to put the Michelin starred L'Enclume through its paces





# FEATURES

From race bikes to Rolls Royces... remote resorts to mountain range rendezvous. We're up to our old tricks again, putting the very best of everything to the test.

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**FEAT  
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# BETTER BY DESIGN

A NEW YORK HOTEL GROUP IS TAKING A REFRESHINGLY BOLD APPROACH TO ITS DECOR

How many organisations put interior design at the top of their importance list? Certainly not workplaces, barring perhaps Google's amazing Zurich office (if you haven't seen this, you really must Google it) and some of the more forward thinking marketing agencies. Restaurants and bars surely do - or should; but so often the opposite seems true. What about hotels? Well, you would think so but, so often, they are dated, indentikit and plain uninspired. When a city has literally thousands of hotels to choose from, how can they stand out from the crowd? Surely décor must then be priority number one? It certainly can be important for the bottom line, after all Olga Polizzi of the Rocco Forte Luxury Hotel Collection observed that, "design may only be 15% of the cost but it can leverage 70% of the income".

As a Lusso reader, hotels will be an integral part of your life so we wanted to uncover a hospitality group that stood apart from the crowd and had put awe-inspiring design at its heart. Any old five-star hotel can make us feel good by providing excellent personal service but our desire was to find places that made us feel special purely because of the surroundings.

Combining both qualities was the vision of Thompson Hotels, a niche hotel group based in North America that has created a small chain of design-led establishments by commissioning the best architects, designers, artists and even couturiers in the business. Their manifesto states that its objectives are to be classically cool and effectively sophisticated but remaining small enough to provide personal service. Well, we hear all sorts of grandiose claims

in our line so we figured that we'd need to find out for ourselves. We did have a feeling that we wouldn't be disappointed, however, as there can't be many hotels that have a photo-lithograph of Andy Warhol etched onto their swimming pool floor. So, off we trotted to New York City to check out the five properties that Thompson Hotels own there. On Virgin Upper Class. Yeah - I know - tough job, someone's got to do it, blah blah.

As we were travelling Upper Class we got to enjoy the Virgin Club Lounge at Heathrow which I've heard described as the best airport experience in the world. It does not disappoint. In fact, I ended up wishing I could have lounged for longer but all too soon we were airborne and being pestered by the cabin crew with the familiar, "More Champagne Mr Fox?". Oh, go on then.

There are five Thompson hotels in New York and I planned to stay at the Thompson Lower East Side and Thompson Columbus Circle but to take a tour of them all. The overall objective for each hotel is for its interior and its very experience to mirror the immediate environment of the hotel's location. What suits one hotel in Soho may not work as well in the financial district.

Lower East Side is an area that was once down-at-heel but has pulled itself up to being one of New York's trendy 'hipster' neighbourhoods and hang-outs. As the taxi pulled up outside I thought the driver had got it wrong as the entrance is definitely on the understated side. No red carpets or grand entrances here, just very subtle brushed steel and smoked glass; an obvious indication that the inside was going to be very cool indeed.

Thompson LES is described as 'the ultimate in haute minimalism and industrial cool' which can't really be argued with. There are clean lines, exposed concrete, lots of black and white and it's all 'oh so ultra modern'. The rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows - great for viewing the cityscapes, low beds and couches, simple metal tables and exposed columns and ceilings. Whilst lying on the Sfera bed linen staring at these concrete columns and ceilings, I pondered on how convenient it is for modern architects and designers to be able to use concrete on the interior. I could imagine how it started, "let's just leave it as it is and people will presume it's trendy"; rather like the ubiquitous exposed pipes and cable ducts in every roof space these days. I later learned that this smooth distressed concrete finish is actually very difficult and expensive to achieve. It has to be polished to a shine by hand and really takes some work. I'm quite glad about that.

On the third floor, there is the outdoor pool and lounge that I was looking forward to seeing. It has a filmstrip image of Andy Warhol photo-lithographed onto the tiles on the pool floor. The hotel's designer Jim Walrod from Murphy & Dine told me that the image is the work of artist Gerard Malanga, Warhol's muse and confidante during the iconic days of the Factory. He also said that as some of the image is black, it's actually illegal to have this on a swimming pool floor but they somehow managed to get permission (special dispensation from the Pope I think) and that it is therefore unique in the States. It certainly is very unusual and makes the whole scene achingly hip.



## FEAT URES

Above the beds in each room there is a lightbox image courtesy of influential American artist Lee Friedlander which Walrod tells me was another coup due to the semi-reclusive artist not agreeing to do anything similar in nature before. I figured that this boy Walrod must be a persuasive player.

We also tried the hotel's popular restaurant it as Stephen Brandman, the hotel's co-owner, had very kindly arranged a table for us, despite the fact that Shang was solidly booked for weeks ahead. Although perhaps it wasn't that kind, as we still had to pay for the meal. It was certainly worth it though as I'd never tasted Chinese food quite like it before. Post-meal we took the lift to the bar at the top of the building which is open only to members and hotel guests. Design-wise it's nothing to write home about but it certainly had a good atmosphere. I was expecting a rather sedate cocktail lounge affair so I was more than surprised to enter an atmosphere more akin to a British nightclub, complete with some spectacularly drunken exhibits. I felt instantly at home and had a wonderful evening!

When it was time to leave Thompson LES, the polite staff took care of everything quickly and efficiently. They were all good fun and happy to share a joke which came as another surprise, as I had always presumed that young, trendy service staff had to be sulky pains in the arse by law. All in all, it was strike one for Thompson as being in this hotel certainly lifts the spirits and succeeded in giving me that special feeling that I was seeking.

Meanwhile uptown the hip bell boys at Thompson 6 Columbus were preparing to welcome us with confident greetings that managed to sound neither corporate nor rehearsed - and if they weren't standing around hotel doors you would probably think they were just some cool, young Noi Yoik exec types. This is mainly thanks to the uniforms they strutted around in, although uniform is not the best description. They were designed by rising fashion stars Marcus Wainwright and David Neville, the duo behind rag&bone. Apparently their trademark is 'a sleek and urban aesthetic', and here superfine denim is the material of choice with slightly eccentric details including hunting coats, ankle boots and on-trend skinny ties. The look is clean and crisp and a million miles from the usual, run-of-the-mill hotel uniform.

Apparently the individually designed uniform idea - the design and even the designer is different for each property was a key consideration behind the Thompson style guidelines; one reason being the



**Top Right** Apartment 60 of the Thompson Hotel, New York

**Opposite page** The Columbus Loft Suite, New York. Interesting decor!

avoidance of the shiny polyester trouser look that's common to the traditional hotel uniform. They do look very cool on the men and very flattering on the women, although I can't imagine anyone tubby looking good in these outfits, so it's just as well that all at 6 Columbus seem to be pencil thin (I also think the staff room probably has a sign that says, 'You don't have to gorgeous to work here - but it helps'). Maybe they all go jogging in Central Park which is literally over the road.

6 Columbus was designed by the acclaimed Steven Sclaroff and, according to the blurb, the style is "evocative of the mod 1960s design aesthetic infused with 21st century sensibility". There's a smallish lobby with low-key lighting, unusual photography and a huge white fluffy rug that both brightens and warms up the space. The clean lines is finished off with the longest leather couch I've ever seen. It sets the scene

and begins your hotel experience by making you instantly feel as stylish as the surroundings. I definitely wasn't that, however, as I was wearing all of the clothes in my suitcase together at the same time, desperate to ward off the bitter cold outside.

The hotel houses the end-destination restaurant, The Blue Ribbon Sushi Bar and Grill, which was rated one of the Top 50 restaurants in New York City by the 2006 ZAGAT Guide. The restaurant interior is by Asfour & Guzy Architects and whilst it's clearly designed to have an Asian-inspired subtlety to complement the simple elegance of the fare, it largely falls flat for me. There are no windows so the focal point becomes the small open kitchen and an over-riding use of, what looks like, beech wood for the floors, tables and (unpadded) chairs and is maybe a touch too utilitarian for my taste. The word canteen sprang to mind but with bottles of Saki going for up to









"...BRIGHT, UPLIFTING AND VERY 'BIG CITY METROPOLIS'.  
THERE IS A MIXTURE OF STYLES AND STARKLY  
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\$700 it's clearly attracting the desired up-market clientele.

The corridor from the lobby leading to the lifts, or elevators, has floor to ceiling deep brown fur on the walls. It's not real animal fur but it certainly looks and feels just like pony skin to me (not that I am in the habit of skinning ponies by the way). During my stay I didn't hear anyone else remark on it but maybe they're more used to visiting establishments with fur on the walls than I am. The pony skin continues into the lift where I'm sure it must subconsciously remind guests that they are somewhere special and unusual and that design has been considered for every aspect of the hotel. After all, how many stylish lifts have you noticed in your life? It's handy as well since, if the lift breaks down you can skin the walls and make yourself a nice warm coat and pants combination.

You leave the dim lighting behind as you step into the hotel rooms. They're bright, uplifting and very 'big city metropolis'. There is a mixture of styles and starkly contrasting materials that include white plastic dining furniture, teak wall panels, dark oak flooring, coloured carpet, rugs and animal hides (pretty sure that they were real this time).

Consistent with the Thompson theme, all the hotels use artwork from prominent artists and the rooms at 6 Columbus showcase works from one of the world's most respected fashion photographers, Guy Bourdin. Colourful portraits of beautiful women dominate the walls and really live up the mood. The hotel is in the epicentre of real uptown New York and 6 Columbus is seen as a welcome niche addition to a district which was once previously dominated by the big-brand chain hotels.

Columbus Square is close to the theatre district, some top Manhattan museums and high-end restaurants. Once a traditionally formal business environment this hotel and its close neighbour, The Hudson, prove how the area is getting more creative. Over the road is one of Trump's skyscrapers and I thought about old Donald for a while as I styled my hair in the funky deep-blue tiled bathroom. From our suite window, we could also see Central Park which seemed to be beckoning us over for a run.

We had brought running gear especially to experience this very popular NY pastime and we duly headed out on a bitterly cold Sunday morning with the falling snow half blinding us. Style is clearly a theme in New York and unlike the UK, there were no runners in football shorts and knackered old t-shirts. Oh no, all of these guys and

gals - including the pensioners - wore the latest lycra and Gore Tex running gear. Unfortunately, I still had the remnants of a hangover and seeing old people exercising in lycra is not to be recommended for such conditions. Meanwhile, downtown are Thompson's other properties, one of which, Gild Hall lies in the heart of the financial centre. I took a tour with the designer Jim Walrod and was struck by just how different it is to the other hotels. He's certainly not a one-trick pony, isn't Jim. There was a real mixture of American contemporary style with the design aesthetic of the more opulent side of 1940s France and 1950s England. I know that sounds unusual, after all, opulence is not something you associate with post war austerity. Maybe it was so hard to define because I was trying to define it but you have to hand it to the Thompson group for giving free rein to such an imaginative designer. As we all know, if we need to spend more than one minute in most hotel lobbies or bars, we will immediately look for reading material or play with our phones to relieve the boredom. Not so here, with all the décor styles, the objets d'art, the over-sized chrome antler chandeliers and the bound works of literature and history lining the walls, it could keep you visually entertained for hours. I felt a contradiction coming on - I liked the minimalism in Thompson LES but loved the busy approach taken here at Gild Hall. The restaurant and bar style is that of an "English Tavern" but not in a tacky theme-pub way, whilst up the very dimly-lit staircase you are almost completely transported to an old English gentlemen's club. This wonderfully cosy space is home to a library and champagne bar and is a popular haunt in which to unwind after work for the kings and queens of Wall Street. This 'end-destination' ethos fulfils Thompson's objective of ensuring its hotel restaurants and bars are desirable enough for locals to want to use as well as hotel patrons. Gild Hall has been designed this way to reflect the character of its neighbourhood and its occupants but it also attracts many a celeb - possibly due to its location, being outside of the usual habitat for celebrity spotters or paps. Hip hop star Snoop Dogg recently insisted on only alighting from his huge tour bus when it was directly outside the hotel's main door, even though this proved incredibly difficult and long-winded due to the hotel being situated on a tiny, narrow street. I did originally think that it was a typical dumb attention seeking stunt until I envisaged Snoop and his large entourage struggling up the street carrying bags and

cases so then conceded that he might actually have had a point.

The hotel rooms lived up to the standard of being another eclectic mix of styles right down to the tartan blanket throws on the ends of the beds. When the designer ordered these, the Thompson's buyers figured that there must have been some mistake. They do look like they're better suited to a Guest House in Inverness but it works and gives the room a quirky twist.

Huge brown leather headboards come complete with brass buckles (the mind boggles) that look like they originated in an English Hunting Lodge. All rooms have custom made wooden furniture but I must admit that I was baffled by the choice for the cabinets and sideboards. To me they looked exactly like the old 1970s painted formica jobs now more often seen at Car Boot Sales than in world class hotels. Obviously it's an ironic nod to the past but, in my view, it was the only weak link.

The remaining hotels are the Smyth Tribeca which became uber popular after De Niro used it for the Tribeca Film Festival and the flagship 60 Thompson in the heart of Soho - which has a wonderfully cool indoor bar area and a rooftop lounge with incredible city views. If you appreciate contemporary design I can't imagine you will be disappointed by any of the Thompsons. They also have hotels in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Washington DC, Sonoma and soon Toronto, where the new hotel will have its own outdoor skating rink and an on-roof infinity outdoor pool with unobstructed views of Lake Ontario, Fort York and the CN Tower. Thompson clearly has ambition and don't do things by halves. A refreshing characteristic in these cautious times.

Back at JFK we shared the Virgin Club Lounge with Paul McCartney's current squeeze, the American millionaire-businesswoman, Nancy Shevell. Nancy kept us entertained by doing the most bizarre stretches and nearly caused me to spill my Champagne.

Unfortunately, lady luck did not shine on us for our return journey, Upper and Premium classes were both full so we were relegated to turning right into Economy. See the hardships I endure for Lusso? ■

As Lusso Magazine's features editor, Al has the laborious task of circumnavigating the globe in search of the world's finest experiences. Pester him at [al@lussoluxury.com](mailto:al@lussoluxury.com). Al flew with Virgin Atlantic from London Heathrow direct to JFK. Information can be found by contacting Travel Gurus on 0844 573 2460 or further information online at [www.vhphotels.co.uk](http://www.vhphotels.co.uk)