

# Sphere

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## The Boutique Vibe

It's what makes these hotels so special









# the Boutique vibe

Why the personal touch makes all the difference

*By Mark Redvers*

THE GENERALLY-ACCEPTED DEFINITION of a boutique hotel used to be fairly straightforward: small, funky, quirky, or a combination of all three, a property that was instantly recognisable as somewhere that took the opposite approach to the major international hotel chains' proclivity for uniformity.

In today's market, where the major brand players are also launching city properties that are trumpeted as boutique hotels, the definition has become broader, and the boundaries a little more blurred, but industry professionals all agree that the key component is personalised service, the kind of name-knowing approach that makes guests feel they are in a small, family-owned place even if the reality is rather different.

For larger hotels aspiring to achieve boutique chic it has meant abandoning the instinctive formality that comes with corporate-run operations – funky lobbies instead of cavernous entrances with marble pillars, uniforms in colours other than black, and encouraging staff to express their personalities and act on instinct rather than sticking to a set of rules.

Not that finding individuals with a people-pleasing attitude towards service has ever been a problem in Asia. But in many ways the region has taken its time to meet the increased demand for boutique-type hotels; travellers from the so-called Generation X, now in their 30s and 40s, are particularly receptive to the idea of spending the night in a less formal place, one that does not have scores of identical twins in other parts of the world.

After a late start, the Asian boutique-hotel boom is truly on its way, with properties





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now opening at warp speed. The past few years have seen Hong Kong – a city that already has more than its fair share of world-beating hotels – open a whole slew of individualistic properties geared towards the more discerning traveller. Among them is the new Hutchison Whampoa Limited hotel, Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees, located closed to the old Kai Tak airport.

“I think a boutique hotel is all about personality,” said General Manager Christina Cheng. “I like to stay in smaller hotels when I travel; you see the same staff the next morning and they begin to know you. I like that feeling and I want to encourage that in this hotel – an intimate environment. For me a boutique hotel is where you come in to be recognised and that people will recognise you. Warm and competent staff are important.”

A funky design twist also helps. In the case of the Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees people entering the lobby get a feeling of being slightly off kilter, eight degrees in fact, thanks to a clever optical illusion created by designer Patrick Leung, an effect that has been likened to looking at the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy.

Tampering with the traditional lobby design was one of the key tenets of designer American Ian Schrager, generally regarded as the creator of the modern-day boutique hotel. Mr Schrager, who was involved in the wild and wacky Studio 54 New York nightclub, whose patrons included Andy Warhol,



Michael Jackson, Elton John, Jackie Onassis, Bette Midler and Elizabeth Taylor, also claims credit for inventing concepts such as the hotel positioned as home away from home, the hotel as theatre, lobby socialising, the indoor-outdoor lobby, the urban resort and the urban spa. The very first Schragger venture was the Morgans Hotel in New York, in the mid 1980s, followed by the Royalton and the Paramount, where guests were encouraged to chat and drink in the lobby.

If Mr Schragger invented the boutique hotel, then Adrian Zecha can most certainly claim credit for founding its ocean-side equivalent in Asia, in the shape of the chic and casual Aman resorts. The first, Amanpuri, dispensed with any kind of conventional check-in area or, indeed, any kind of central building at all; guests were housed in fabulously

## New Hotel's Winning Formula

Hong Kong's latest boutique hotel, the Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees, is proving to be a popular choice among discerning travellers. Since the 702-room property opened late last year close to the old Kai Tak airport, occupancy levels have been high and it has already won a prestigious industry award – Best Designer Hotel at the Guangdong Travel Fair.

Hotel General Manager Christina Cheng says the eye-catching design – its lobby is an optical illusion that gives the impression of being slightly off-centre – comfortable rooms and tip-top service have made it a hit with travellers looking for a quality boutique hotel at affordable rates.

“I think people love boutique hotels because they give you a good feeling, once you try one, you want to go back,” she explained. “As well as the design, it is also about quality and service. Coffee, for example, is not in a big jar, it is made freshly, and the bread also is fresh. I think it is a worldwide trend – people want to get away from huge conventional hotels.”

The Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees is located just 20 minutes from the popular Tsim Sha Tsui shopping area via the hotel's luxury shuttle buses. Ms Cheng, an industry veteran who has worked in top hotels in Macau and Hong Kong, was heavily involved in the staff selection: among her hires was a Nepalese working at her local coffee shop who had impressed her with his affable manner and efficient service.

“I think we have opened a happy hotel with really quality service,” said Ms Cheng. “Our food is really good and international. We focus a lot on quality and the buffet counter plates are not flooded with food as we keep constantly putting out fresh food. For desserts we have more choices rather than big pieces of chocolate cake and cheesecake. The sushi is freshly made and our beef noodle soup has proved to be very popular already. We make our own XO chilli sauce.

“You need to have an angle for a boutique hotel and 8 Degrees means people remember it very quickly. It sounds like baht which is Cantonese for getting rich. I think the designers have done a really good job, you walk in and it is a great feeling.”

The hotel has a banquet room, two stylish restaurants, a business centre, a fitness centre and an outdoor swimming pool and whirlpool surrounded by lush landscaping. The hotel's coffee shop has plans to open on to the sidewalk, allowing al fresco streetside dining, a rarity in space-starved Hong Kong. The immediate area is well served by good-value dining options, with some of the city's best Thai restaurants a short stroll away in Kowloon City.



So far, guests have been mostly from Asian countries, in particular China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. In future, the mix is also expected to include travellers from the United States, Europe, Russia and India.

luxurious individual Thai-style villas and spent their days lounging on the private Phuket beach, doing lazy laps of the Roman style pool, or feasting at the gourmet restaurant.

It was an immediate hit among the jet set, people who valued its exclusivity and privacy and had no problem paying big money for a totally secluded vacation. Amanpuri was followed by similar properties, initially in Asia, later in other parts of the world.

In China, the boom in boutique hotels is hard to miss. In Beijing, there are now boutique hotels galore, including several that have adapted the city's traditional courtyard architecture.

Further south, in the port city of Shanghai, some of the latest offerings have an eco-conscious theme, a trend led by Australian Jules Kwan and American Scott Barrack, young entrepreneurs who have established a successful business, Space Development, converting period-piece houses and offices in the city for modern use.

"One of our core values is to practise what we preach, so all of our employees are well versed in energy-saving practices, such as biking, using public transport and conserving electricity at the office," said Mr Kwan. "We have developed a training programme to educate and instruct our staff in carbon-neutrality and sustainability."

David Jones, an Associate Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management, thinks the United States has the best examples of the boutique genre.

"In my opinion Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants were the first to develop boutique hotels as a group and they are doing the best job of defining a boutique hotel today, although they prefer to call it a lifestyle hotel," he says. "Another boutique operator, which also happens to be based in San Francisco, is Joie de Vivre hotels.

"What makes boutique hotels different? Well, if you take the 'lifestyle' hotel concept, then it is about customising the guest experience, a one-to-one experience if you will. You need to know each customer and know what they need, which means a very good database system.

"However, it is not just about knowing amenity preference that has become commonplace with all brands today, it's more about knowing what the entire lifestyle of the guest is and matching what you have to them, as best you can. Kimpton has many different types of hotels and the key for them is 'every hotel tells a story.' "

Smaller boutique hotels, which do not have the budget for marketing or

advertising, have the option of joining organisations that specialise in promoting such niche properties, whether it is a game lodge in Africa, a resort in Thailand or a hotel in central London.

The human touch is hugely important for Brad Cocks, the Senior Vice President for Asia Pacific of the travel website, the Kiwi Collection, who spends much of the year checking out quality hotels, including numerous boutique properties.

"I think in most cases boutique hotels offer an enhanced experience, usually incorporating a new trend such as design or technology and also escapism from cookie-cutter offerings," he said. "An experience that delivers on its promise: simple, easy, efficient, fun, generous.

"The basics are always taken for granted now – flat screen television and so on – it is the human touch that makes the difference. I think simply based on the economy of scale, in a boutique hotel the ratio of staff to guests is much higher and allows for a more intimate relationship.


"The Establishment Hotel in Sydney is a great example of a boutique hotel, offering unique rooms with a very long room configuration, beds removed from the wall on a slant, enhanced room technology and access to some of the city's best restaurants and bars."

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is also planning to provide hospitality training to tourism students with the help of a boutique hotel, to be run by the school.

"There needs to be a careful balance of commercial reality and the ideology of nurturing the students in a subtle and real way," explained General Manager Richard Hatter, who stressed that students will be in a minority and will be supervised by experienced staff.

"We have training restaurants and bars run by professionals – think Jamie Oliver's 15 Restaurant in the UK. These will not be simulations but reality situations to which the public can walk in off the street, in addition to the restaurants run 100 per cent by our team for hotel guests.

"What makes a good boutique hotel? I feel that it should be a bespoke upscale hotel with stylish designs, responsive service, confident delivery and passionate staff. It's more about not being a chain mentality but being independent and responsive. The team are empowered to deliver whatever the guest wants."

The relatively late arrival of boutique hotels in Hong Kong and other Asian jurisdictions allows them to offer guests newer buildings equipped with the full technological bag of tricks that 21st-century travellers demand, a high staff-guest ratio and the kind of warm, personalised service for which the region is so famous. 



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