

HOTELS SPAIN

# Madrid puts on the ritz

Fiona Carruthers enjoys royal treatment at the lavishly refurbished Mandarin Oriental hotel, and conquers the Prado Museum next door.

"Madrid is having a moment," declares Elisa Palma over the clack-clack-clack of her kitten heels across the white marble floor in the reception of the Mandarin Oriental Ritz, one of Europe's most famed hotels.

"A five-star moment, with Four Seasons and Edition Hotels both opening their first properties in Madrid [in 2020 and 2022 respectively], and of course, us, after the biggest refresh in the history of this property's 113 years."

Palma, the hotel's young digital marketing manager, pauses to take in the mid-morning scene in the ground-floor Palm Court just past reception, where Madrid's smart set rubs shoulders with in-house guests, the former dressed in light suede jackets and linen; the latter in designer runners and athleisure wear.

People sip espressos, nibble berry-laden pastries, scroll through their phones, and socialise in the sunshine flooding the Palm Court via a vast glass ceiling—a key feature of the hotel's €99 million (\$163 million) three-year renovation.

"Luxury has finally arrived in our city," Palma proclaims with a radiant smile.

It's easy to imagine King Alfonso XIII making a similar declaration on the night of October 2 in 1910, when he and his wife, Queen Victoria Eugenia (the granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria), hosted a no-expenses-spared opening party in their purpose-built belle-époque hotel, featuring a ballroom, smoking room and dining room.

Built at No. 5 in the Retiro district, the Ritz Madrid (now the Mandarin Oriental Ritz, Madrid) came about after the well-travelled Alfonso (1886-1941) was inspired by the new luxury hotels popping up across Europe, including the Ritz Paris, opened in 1898, London's Carlton Hotel (1899) and The Ritz London (early 1900s).

By contrast, when the 20-year-old Spanish king married Victoria Eugenia in 1906, foreign royalty had to be billeted out to private homes due to Madrid's lack of suitable hotels—impressing on Alfonso that Spain was



poorly prepared for the modern age.

Madrid might have been the place where Andalusian flamenco took off, with fine architecture from the gothic to the Moorish revivalist, grand museums, and stately parks and shady boulevards, but it was a disaster if you needed a five-star hotel.

After returning from his honeymoon (which included stays at The Ritz in Paris and London), Alfonso contacted their founder, hotelier César Ritz, for help.

Charles Mewès, the architect of the Ritz Paris, submitted plans and construction in Madrid began under the watch of two Spanish architects,



Luis de Landecheo and Lorenzo Gallego.

Built between 1908-1910, their creation, the first steel-framed building in Spain, featured the latest in bathroom technology, electric lights in all rooms, and one telephone on every floor, next to the lift. To ensure it all ran like clockwork, the inaugural hotel director was sent to Paris to be versed in the "Ritz skills" of service and hospitality.

(When Belgian Georges Marquet bought the hotel in 1926, he told staff to secretly take note of any badly dressed, loud or brash guests. Those who didn't pass muster were marked as NRTs – Not Ritz Types – to

ensure they weren't able to stay again.) It's only fair to say that Marquet would have branded Alfonso as an NRT. And yet the "playboy king" (so called because of his extramarital affairs, funding of pornographic cinema and general love of a good time) had astutely ensured Madrid could capitalise on the emerging market of international travellers who wanted plush beds and champagne at the end of their long, gruelling journeys.

Fast-forward to 2023, and not so much has changed in terms of what the average luxury nomad desires. Well, OK – I arrived by a four-engine A380; not so common in



1910. That said, it was 30 hours in cattle class, so I'm feeling the long, gruelling bit.

After all that travelling, the same touches that enthralled the first Madrid Ritz guests in 1910 still delight visitors a century later.

Alfonso's dream of a grand hotel that would impress the new class of global citizens had resulted in the difficult installation of a large crystal ceiling over the Palm Court, which fell into severe disrepair during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when part of the hotel was used as a military hospital.

In the 1960s, what was left of the glass dome was removed and replaced with a normal ceiling. The Mandarin Oriental has finally brought the light back, reinstating a grand glass ceiling over Palm Court.

On my arrival (the day before my tour with Palma), I inadvertently drift away from check-in midway through, following the sunshine flooding into Palm Court in a jet-lagged daze – until a kindly porter gently steers me back to reception.

The same porter wishes me one floor up, to room 105, an elegant one-bedroom Turret Suite with pale wooden floors and a spacious circular living room finished with white lacquered wooden panels. Double-glazed doors open out onto a small wrap-around French balcony overlooking the

hotel's garden, and the busy streets beyond.

In the living room a large vase of fresh flowers is so lush it could be a still life by Juan de Arellano, whose work features heavily at the Prado next door.

The suite's high ceilings are finished with mother-of-pearl mica that emits a golden glow; brass curtain rods hold long cream curtains, and the large bathroom is a triumph of grey marble.

There's also humour, always a welcome diversion in posh hotels. My photo has been superimposed onto a framed, A4-size image of the hotel with a welcome message. Two blue glass bottles of Solán de Cabras mineral water have been personalised with *The Australian Financial Review* stickers in our masthead hue of cyan. I feel the love and attention to detail.

(The next day housekeeping carefully tidies my laptop and iPhone cords, constraining them with neat black Velcro tabs. For once, I'm no longer tripping over cords.)

The king-sized bed is so exquisite in its pressed white linen, I don't get near it for fear I won't get up for a month. As the jet lag hits, and with a welcome champagne already under my belt, I exit the room to soak up Madrid's afternoon sunshine, before hunting down juicy slices of suckling pig



and a glass of sangria near Puerta del Sol, the city's pumping heart.

I only have two nights here, so I'm up early for a brisk jog through Parque del Buen Retiro (better known locally as Retiro), a few blocks from the hotel, before meeting Palma for a hotel tour. This includes the two-Michelin-starred Deessa restaurant, and the new champagne bar for just eight guests, who can pair their bubbles with caviar, oysters, white truffle or Iberian ham.

The hotel's renovation started three years after the Hong Kong-headquartered Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group (MOHG) and the Olayan Group of Saudi Arabia jointly bought the then 167-room property in 2015 for €130 million from Belmond (formerly Orient-Express), who had owned it since 2003.

Spanish architect Rafael de La-Hoz did the refurbishment, with interiors for the 100 rooms and 53 suites by the Paris-based studio Gilles & Boissier.

It followed hot on the heels of the \$US450 million four-year restoration of the Ritz Paris, completed in 2016. The Ritz London, meanwhile, is about to undergo a £300 million (\$571 million) overhaul, with phase one due for completion in 2026.

These three Ritz hotels – Paris, London

and Madrid – are the only properties still standing that were built by César Ritz, who died in 1918.

One of the many highlights of the Madrid renovation is the creation of two new suites, The Mandarin and Ritz Suites, in the two top-floor turrets on level six. They start from €4200 (about \$6905) a night, plus taxes.

The Royal Suite, originally situated on the first floor so royal guests didn't have to hoof it up too many stairs, remains in place.

The renovation reduced overall room count to increase room size, and the design is elegant modern in soothing neutral tones. Like all great hotels, the joy of the Mandarin Oriental Ritz is that you can happily spend hours here in between museum, restaurant and shopping raids.

The extensive spa and wellness centre, including a large gym and a "thermal circuit" with Turkish bath, sauna and a lap pool, is a pleasant spot to while some hours away. It's underground, so there's none of that intense Spanish sunshine, but it's a relaxing zone of extraordinary glamour with chandeliers, soft lighting and plenty of health juices.

Champagne starts flowing at the hotel's outdoor El Jardín del Ritz from 1pm, with **Continued next page**

DESIGN INTERIORS

# Minimalism's maximalist

Stephen Todd revisits the work of Iain Halliday, the master of "magnificent audacity" and restraint.

He grew up knowing that becoming a designer was "inevitable" – and that was very good news for us.

Over the past four decades, the now 62-year-old Iain Halliday, director of the renowned Sydney interior design firm Burley Katon Halliday, has delivered scores of timeless interiors with what New York-based online antiques purveyor 1stDibs calls a "magnificent audacity".

As excess comes back into vogue (literally, in the pages of *Belle* and *Vogue Living* as well as international style bibles *Architectural Digest* and *The World of Interiors*) it felt an opportune time to visit the Potts Point studio of the man behind some of Sydney's signature interiors – including restaurants and hotels, bars and stores as well as tony homes up and down the Pacific coastline.

Occupying the ground floor of a grand Italianate terrace, BKH is entered via a chequerboard verandah; a desk of marble slab signals a portal into other-worldliness, a cylindrical, translucent room divider allows hints of the action within, where 14 staff work on 30 projects.

"These days our work is split fifty-fifty between architecture and interiors," says Halliday, showing me through samples of plush chartreuse carpet (one hiding the TV used for client presentations) with glowing orange Lucite handles; space-age 1960s French seating; fluorescent, aerodynamic artworks by local sculptor Dion Horstmans... The interior is super-chic but extremely functional: a savvy mix of the austere and the ornate.

It's a mélange often referred to as "minimalist maximalism" – a delicious paradox, and an aesthetic that in less adept hands could go terribly awry. "I began working in the opulent, big-budget 1980s and really hit my stride in the period of economic and aesthetic austerity of the 1990s," Halliday says. "So, these seemingly incompatible extremes have come to coexist in my work."

Born in Darwin, he grew up in Collaroy



Halliday at home in his Sydney apartment, above, where his innate style is much in evidence. PHOTO: LOUIE DOUVIS

on Sydney's northern beaches. He attended a "sporty" private school where he happily "had two really good art teachers"; at the age of nine he came home and announced, "I am going to be an architect!" to his bewildered parents.

Where did the decorator gene come from? "Oh, well, my mother definitely ran the house from an aesthetic perspective."

He recalls "graphic brown carpet" throughout the family home, some florid William Morris wallpapers, and "an overriding Parker aesthetic" – referring to Parker Furniture, the mid-century modern Australian cabinet-maker, which closed in 1997 unable to compete with cheap imports. Obsessed by *Vogue Living* (which launched in 1967) and Lego blocks ("they'd



drive my parents and their guests crazy, scattered all over the house"), young Iain was introduced by his father to a real live architect colleague.

"He looked like a sort of bearded bushranger," Halliday smiles at the memory, "dressed in corduroy and smoking a pipe." Taking a look around the architect's office, he decided "I need more glamour than this" and went on to enrol in the interior design course at East Sydney Technical College.

It was here that he discovered *Architectural Digest*, published in New York and renowned for capturing the hard-edged disco glamour of the era, mixed in with a modernist beach vibe shimmering down from the Hamptons and Fire Island. Excelling at design school, Iain was



From above left: Interior details by Iain Halliday including, centre, the Woolwich house in Sydney, and the city's Rosetta Ristorante, right. PHOTOS: COURTESY BKH

offered a job as a gofer by one of his tutors, David Katon, at a firm he worked with, Neil Burley Design. That firm soon mutated into Neil Burley & Partners, which eventually coalesced in the mid-'80s into Burley Katon Halliday.

Over the next decades the studio went into overdrive, delivering restaurants including the former Darley Street Thai, Paramount and the Summit, atop Harry Seidler's Australia Square Tower ("Harry actually called to congratulate us on a fitout he considered better than his 1960s original," recalls Halliday), and Oh Calcutta!

It also did shops for the Australian brand Dinosaur Designs in Sydney, Melbourne and, eventually, Manhattan, as well as fashion labels including Scanlon Theodore. BKH's biggest splash in the hospitality

sector was The Kirketon boutique hotel, in Sydney's Darlinghurst, with its must-be-seen-at-lobby bar and restaurant and its opulently austere play of shiny stone and plush upholstery.

(The hotel was bought in late 2003 by 8Hotels, and many of the original fittings were replaced.) Opened in 1999 in the exuberant pre-Sydney Olympics period, it had massive impact on a young Yasmine Ghoniem, whose multi-award-winning interior design studio YSG is today a constant feature in glossy design magazines.

"The Kirketon was the most exciting boutique hotel to launch in Australia, and you didn't even have to check in to enjoy it," she says. "The exaggerated proportions of the floor pavers in alternating charcoal

tones and the solitary Cappellini floor lamp that almost brushed the ceiling felt really fresh. Its long narrow bar added a voyeuristic angle. Bathed in a lipstick red, it purred, 'Come get me.'

"When I think of Iain, the way he plays with scale comes to mind. There's usually one major bold gesture in every project."

It's this same enthusiasm and appreciation for grand gestures – measured out with extreme discretion – that keeps residential clients on the BKH books. (While Burley left in the late 1990s to establish the furniture brand Anibou, and Katon exited in the early 2000s, Halliday retains the brand with all the history and goodwill it embodies.)

A recently delivered project, a 590-square metre, two-storey harbour-side house at Woolwich, on Sydney's lower north shore, encapsulates the Halliday vibe. "The owners bought what was essentially a concrete slab," the designer explains, noting he was inspired by International Modernism filtered via East Coast American homes designed by the likes of Eero Saarinen in the 1950s and Richard Meier later on. The volume itself is rudimentary, the layers skillfully built up to add a plushness that never teters into merely pretty. "The floor throughout is silver travertine, the walls are hand-finished plaster; the finishings are as hard as brass or as soft as silk velvet. The reflecting pool that surrounds the house, bouncing sunlight off the handmade ceramic wall tiles in shades of chartreuse to pink to inky blue, is 'filled with gold carp'," Halliday points out. Of course it is. **✪**