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the West Coast. The Park Hyatt Aviara Resort opened in San Diego last week. Designed in the Spanish colonial style, it is set on the shores of Batiquitos lagoon, which is home to more than 130 species of birds. Double rooms cost from US\$316 (Dh1,160) including taxes. Visit www.parkhyatt.com



hotel insider

The Vintage Hotel, Brussels

The welcome

Fabian and Isabelle Henrion welcome guests to their Vintage Hotel like part of the family, and although there is no formal concierge or bellboy to carry bags to the room, guests are made to feel immediately at home in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. From the street, the hotel looks pretty formal, a rather grand red brick 1900s building, but walk through the entrance and the stunning collection of vintage Fifties, Sixties and Seventies decor hits you immediately, a riot of colours and cool design. Before opening, this dynamic young couple toured Europe to find the most original design objects in auction rooms, antiques showrooms and flea markets, and they look at their stylish hotel as a work in progress, forever adding new paintings, furniture and lighting. Fabian trained in the hotel business at Claridges in London and the Brussels Hilton, and although he runs his own successful restaurant, the dream was always to open a hotel, and with the Vintage he has certainly created a highly original place to stay in Brussels.

The neighbourhood

The hotel is situated in a quiet side street parallel to Avenue Louise, a grand, elegant boulevard that the people of Brussels proudly call their own Champs-Élysées. This is ideal for anyone interested in shopping as there are the exclusive stores of haute couture labels – Bulgari, Gucci, Hermès – alongside those of designers from Belgium, and there is a wide choice of fine dining restaurants. For businessmen heading towards the European Commission

neighbourhood, Place Schumann is just a couple of stops away on the Metro, or five minutes by taxi. The location of the Vintage is perfect for sightseeing too, as the Mont des Arts, the city's museum district, is a 10-minute walk – and then you arrive right in the heart and soul of Brussels, La Grand Place, the city's main square, lined with opulent medieval guildhalls.

The scene

There has been a buzz about the Vintage since it opened in September, and this cool design hotel has been pretty much fully booked from the first day. The weekend sees a smart, young European clientele, lots of Spanish and Italians, who are not coming to Brussels for typical tourist sightseeing – they definitely won't be joining the tour groups massed round the Mannekin Pis statue or eating waffles topped with whipped cream. These are visitors who tend to know the city already, who are drawn here by its irresistible Jeu de Balle flea market, the upmarket antiques boutiques and galleries specialising in African art that line the elegant Sablon Square, and world-class museums like the brand new Musée Magritte or the cutting-edge Bozar.

During the week, like all hotels here in the de facto capital of Europe, the guests are predominantly business people. But the owner confirmed what I saw myself, that this is not the normal pinstriped brigade, up for an early breakfast then rushing off to the office, but rather a fashionably dressed creative crowd, who are still sipping their cappuccinos at 10 in the morning.

The service

Could not be more friendly and helpful. One of the owners is around during the day and in the early evening and, when I returned after midnight, the night staff were just as polite, providing me with a bottle of water to take up to the room and asking whether I wanted a coffee.

The room

There are 29 spacious rooms and all are furnished and decorated differently. The vintage interiors range from Scandinavian industrial metal desks to a red plastic phone that could have come from "Swinging Sixties" Carnaby Street. Kitsch pop art wallpaper contrasts with a more sombre black-and-white colour scheme. The owners have invested in excellent beds, so a good night's sleep is guaranteed. The newly renovated bathrooms are fine but a little basic, with none of the usual soaps, body lotion or cotton buds that we tend to expect hotels to pamper us with. For the moment, Wi-Fi is free in the bar and lobby, but guests have to pay €5 (Dh22) for a 48-hour internet connection in their rooms. It surely won't be long before the owners realise that this is outdated and they will have to offer free Wi-Fi throughout the hotel.

The food

The self-service breakfast buffet is outstanding, from the freshly-baked bread to a wide choice of yoghurts, cereals and muesli, plus a surprising selection of local cheeses. On the downside, there is no restaurant or room service, while the lounge bar serves only

snacks. However, Fabian owns his own well-known restaurant and is an enthusiastic foodie, brimming with suggestions for where to have dinner.

Loved

The attention to detail in the vintage styling was absolutely perfect, from the wonderful swirling psychedelic decor in the lifts, resembling Dr Who's Tardis, to the kitsch Sixties wallpaper, right down to the room keyring, attached to an authentic Rubik's Cube.

Hated

The wardrobes in all the rooms are an example of minimalist design going too far – just an open rack with a few coat hangers and metal trays. Ugly and also totally impractical if you want to hang up a dripping coat.

The verdict

The Vintage is a brilliant addition to Brussels' hotel scene, a refreshing alternative to predictable international chains, and an address that perfectly mirrors this surprising, eccentric city. What's more, the room rates are incredibly competitive compared to more standard hotels. The friendly family welcome and excellent insider tips for discovering Brussels well make up for the lack of a professional concierge.

The bottom line

A double room costs from €90 (Dh416) including breakfast. Vintage Hotel, 45 Rue Dejoncker, 1060 Brussels (www.vintagehotel.be; 00 32 2 533 9989).

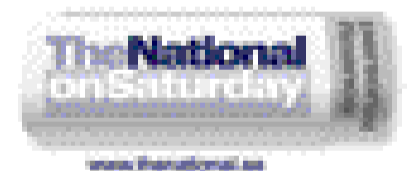
★ John Brunton



Each room at the Vintage Hotel in Brussels features design objects hand-picked by Fabian and Isabelle Henrion, the owners. Serge Anton / Vintage Hotel

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