

THE GOLD LIST 2009

★ BEST HOTELS FOR AMBIENCE & DESIGN

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AFRICA, MIDDLE EAST & INDIAN OCEAN

★ Sabi Sabi Earth Lodge

South Africa 95.29

Earth is an innovative lodge with just 13 suites in the Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, adjacent to the Kruger National Park. Each mud-walled room has a private plunge pool, glass-fronted bathroom and butler service. A central indoor/outdoor dining area overlooks a water hole, and there's a library, spa and meditation garden. Sculptures by South African artist Geoffrey Armstrong are on display throughout. The impressive wine cellar has more than 6,000 bottles in stock and is available for private dining.

X-factor Clearly influenced by his surroundings, architect Mohammed Hans sculpted the lodge into the earth using an eco-friendly design that feels both African and modern. Sabi Sand Reserve, South Africa (00 27 13 735 5261; www.sabisabi.com). Doubles from R15,000 (about £945)

★ Singita Sabi Sand

South Africa 94.50

The original Singita (there are now four) comprises three extremely luxurious safari lodges on an 18,000-hectare concession in the Sabi Sand Private Game Reserve: traditional Ebony Lodge, contemporary Afro-chic Boulders Lodge and Castleton Camp, an elegant private house. The first two have 12 air-conditioned suites with plunge pools; Castleton Camp has six and a swimming pool. The talented chef specialises in pan-African cuisine, the game rangers are the best you will find in Africa and the extensive cellar brings the world's wines to the bush.

X-factor While each lodge has its own distinctive identity, they are linked by exquisite craftsmanship and regularly updated, increasingly sophisticated decor. Sabi Sand Reserve, South Africa (00 27 21 683 3424; www.singita.com). Doubles from R17,700 (about £1,115)

ASIA

★ Evason Ana Mandara & Six Senses Spa - Nha Trang Vietnam 97.69

The Ana Mandara is on a private beach on Vietnam's southern coast. Its 74 rooms, in 17 traditional-style villas, all have French windows opening onto balconies; they are furnished in rattan and other local materials. Facilities include the highly regarded Six Senses Spa, two pools, tennis courts, a dive centre and a library with internet access. Vietnamese and international cuisine is served in the Pavilion restaurant, but guests can eat on their balconies if they prefer.

X-factor Inspired by Vietnamese villages, the resort is designed to blend into the beautiful grounds, which are maintained by five full-time gardeners. The spa's setting is particularly beautiful, with coconut trees and lotus ponds.

Beachside Tran Phu Boulevard, Nha Trang, Vietnam (00 84 58 352 2222; www.sixsenses.com). Doubles from £220

★ Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, Chiang Mai Thailand 97.61

This architecturally ambitious resort is set in 60 acres on the edge of Chiang Mai. Its 123 rooms include two-storey villas and colonial-style suites and residences, some with plunge pools and all with huge bathrooms. A range of cuisines is available, including French at Farang Ses and Chinese at Fujian. There are three bars, two large pools, tennis and squash courts, a cookery school and a cultural centre. The superb Dheva Spa has 18 treatment suites and an Ayurvedic centre run by two resident doctors.

X-factor By blending architectural influences from Burma to Laos – and medieval Chiang Mai – local architect Rachen Intawong has created a stunning resort. The Mandalay Palace-style spa, with its striking, seven-tiered roof representing the seven steps to nirvana, is serenely beautiful. 51/4 Chiang Mai-Sankampaeng Road Moo 1 T. Tasala A Muang, Chiang Mai, Thailand (00 66 53 888888; www.mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai). Doubles from £254

★ Rambagh Palace

Jaipur, India 97.53

The former residence of the Maharaja of Jaipur, Rambagh Palace was built in 1853. Almost a century later it became the first Rajasthani palace to be converted into a hotel. Breathtakingly opulent, with marbled corridors, it has 79 lavish rooms and suites and 47 acres of landscaped gardens. Among the grandest suites is Sukh Niwas, whose decor combines royal tradition with contemporary design. As well as the bedroom (whose circular bed has ceiling-to-floor drapes), it has a sitting area, a dining space, a private terrace and a bathroom (with Jacuzzi). The hotel has indoor and outdoor pools and a small but beautiful spa. The three restaurants include the grand Suvarna Mahal dining hall, where guests eat under frescoed ceilings in what was the palace's ballroom.

X-factor The palace atmosphere survives. The property is still owned by the family of the Maharaja of Jaipur, and the glamorous Maharani who still lives within the estate can occasionally be seen at dinner. Bhawani Singh Road, Jaipur, India (00 91 141 221 1919; www.tajhotels.com). Doubles from £393

AUSTRALASIA & SOUTH PACIFIC

★ Huka Lodge New Zealand 97.21

The 20 lodge rooms at this secluded 1920s fishing resort, idyllically located near Lake Taupo on North Island, are set along the bank of the Waikato River. Spacious and bright, with outdoor terraces, they have a comfortable, 'cabin' look; their bathrooms have under-floor heating and sunken tubs. There is more spacious accommodation in the four-suite Owner's Cottage, whose light, Hamptons-style interior makes the most of a collection of works by some of New Zealand's best artists. Cottage guests can be served dinner in the central living room, or self-cater; those staying in the lodge rooms eat at large tables in Huka Lodge's dining room. The big attraction here is some of the world's best rainbow-trout fishing; but there are also natural hot

springs in the grounds, as well as tennis courts and a pool. Hunting, rafting and golf can be arranged.

X-factor Used by guests during the day and for pre-dinner drinks, the central Lodge Room is elegant and cosy, with a large open fireplace and panoramic views of the Waikato River.

Huka Falls Road, Taupo, North Island, New Zealand (00 64 7 378 5791; www.hukalodge.com). Doubles from NZ\$1,474 (about £525)

★ Yasawa Island Resort & Spa Fiji 96.75

A luxury island resort surrounded by white-sand beaches and tropical rainforest, with accommodation in 18 thatched bures. Each one is decorated in a contemporary Fijian style with plantation shutters, rattan furniture, an outdoor shower and a large sundeck. The open-sided restaurant (which has one of the best wine selections in Fiji) serves Fijian/international cuisine with a focus on seafood. Facilities include a swimming pool, tennis court, beachfront spa and PADI dive centre.

X-factor As the only resort on this quiet, palm-fringed island, Yasawa has a castaway feel. The design brings together indoor and outdoor spaces, with open-air showers, large windows and open-sided buildings. Yasawa Island, Fiji (00 679 672 2266; www.yasawa.com). Doubles from US\$999

★ Bay of Fires Lodge

Tasmania 96.68

Set on a ridge 40 metres above the sea, this dramatic 10-room lodge is the only structure on a 20km stretch of wild coast fringing Mount William National Park. It is used for four-day hiking trips from Quamby Estate near Launceston. Solar power provides the lodge's lighting, and meals are served next to an open fire on a timber deck.

X-factor The stylish, glass-and-wood building was constructed from Tasmanian hardwood and plantation pine (carried by hand or helicopter to the site, for environmental reasons). The rooms are minimalist in design with supremely comfortable beds and sea or bush views. ➤

METHODOLOGY: The Gold List 2009 has been compiled by Condé Nast Traveller's editors, and is a selection of the hotels that received the highest ratings in the Readers' Travel Awards 2008. The scores presented here are a percentage index of satisfaction derived from marks given by our readers to the hotels on six criteria: Location, Food, Rooms, Service, Leisure Facilities and Ambience & Design

Gold list

► *Launceston, Tasmania, Australia* (00 61 3 6392 2211; www.bayoffires.com.au). Four-day treks from A\$1,900 (about £750) per person

THE AMERICAS & CARIBBEAN

★ **Fasano São Paulo Brazil 97.28**

Part of the rapidly expanding, family-owned Fasano hospitality empire, this São Paulo property was the first of the group's two hotels. Set in the chi-chi Jardins neighbourhood, it is perfectly located for the city's restaurants and boutiques. There are 60 rooms on 20 floors, all with large bathrooms, Persian rugs and views over the city. The three-floor spa has a pool, five treatment rooms, a gym and sauna. Dining options include the celebrated Fasano which, under chef Salvatore Loi, is one of the best Italian restaurants in South America.

X-factor Elegant and understated, the 1930s-inspired decor has a grown-up, masculine feel. Antique leather armchairs rub shoulders with contemporary fixtures and dark hardwoods. Baretto, the hotel's intimate jazz bar, is one of the hot spots of the city's nightlife.

Rua Vittorio Fasano 88, São Paulo, Brazil (00 55 11 3896 4000; www.fasano.com.br). Doubles from US\$654

★ **Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France St Barts 97.13**

Overlooking Flamands Bay, one of the island's most beautiful beaches, this small, privately owned resort has a chic, beach-house elegance. There are 37 light and airy rooms, suites, villas and bungalows, some set in gardens on the hillside, others on the beach, all with patios or terraces. The newest are the four one-bedroom beach suites right on the bay, each with its own infinity-edged plunge pool and private parking spot. There is also a two-bed Fisherman's Cottage. Facilities include a full-service Molton Brown Spa, floodlit tennis courts and two freshwater pools. La Case de l'Isle serves classic French cuisine. The unobtrusive staff are excellent, attending to every detail.

X-factor Designed by Penny Morrison of Morrison Interiors, the breezy interiors have a relaxed, sophisticated feel that sits perfectly with the island's upmarket charm. *St Barts, French Antilles* (00 590 590 275666; www.isle-de-france.com). Doubles from €551

★ **The Setai Miami 97.09**

Managed by Adrian Zecha's GHM group, the oceanfront Setai is one of the most luxurious and beautiful

hotels on South Beach. Behind the fabulous, Art Deco-inspired façade are 75 rooms and 50 suites, all incredibly chic with black-granite baths and rainfall showers. An adjacent, 40-storey glass tower has a 10,000sq ft penthouse with its own lap pool, serviced apartments below, and a recording studio. There's a spa and three pools, and daybeds are laid out on the beach in front of the hotel. The dining options are pan-Asian cuisine in The Restaurant, international dishes in The Grill, sophisticated Asian 'stall food' in the The Bar & Courtyard and Mediterranean dishes at the Pool & Beach Bar.

X-factor A sleek Asian look (the brick, bronze and teak lobby is particularly beautiful) has been fused with high-octane Miami style to spectacular effect. Considering its location at the heart of South Beach, the hotel is surprisingly serene and relaxed.

2001 Collins Avenue, Miami, Florida, USA (00 1 305 520 6000; www.setai.com). Doubles from \$960

UK

★ **Haymarket Hotel London 97.36**

The newest member of the excellent Firmdale Group mixes traditional style with contemporary British design. The hotel comprises a group of townhouses (some by 18th-century architect John Nash), one of which has its own entrance and can be rented in its entirety. The 50 bedrooms and suites have large sash windows, and granite, glass and oak bathrooms. There's a stunning basement pool with a bar area, a small gym, beauty-treatment rooms and a popular restaurant and bar which attract a media crowd.

X-factor Kit Kemp's design blends muted colours with bright, bold patterns. The large contemporary-art collection includes a stainless-steel sculpture by Tony Cragg and a striking light installation by Martin Richman in the pool bar. *1 Suffolk Place, London SW1* (020 7470 4000; www.firmdale.com). Doubles from £294

★ **Babington House Somerset 97.08**

The country sister to London's Soho House has undergone a refurbishment, completed in the summer, to celebrate its 10th anniversary. This contemporary country-house hotel and private members' club is set in 18 acres of grounds and has 32 spacious bedrooms in several buildings, including a new, 700sq ft room known as the Playroom. Bistro-style food is served in two dining rooms

and on the terrace. The original Cowshed spa has been turned into a space with a gym and swimming pools, called Cowshed Active; treatments will now take place in the brand-new Cowshed Relax spa, set in a Victorian walled garden. Treatments are also offered in the three guest rooms beside the spa; they have wood-burning stoves, mezzanine-level bedrooms and private terraces with copper hot tubs.

X-factor The revamped interiors exude cool. Their design style is an eclectic mix of original panelled walls and shuttered bay windows, hip retro and modern furniture, plus the latest technology.

Babington, near Frome, Somerset (01373 812 266; www.babingtonhouse.co.uk). Doubles from £260

★ **One Aldwych London 97.03**

This 105-bedroom hotel opened in 1998 in a building erected in 1907, once the premises of the *Morning Post* newspaper. It is in London's theatreland, only a block away from the Thames and within easy walking distance of Covent Garden. The hotel's style is contemporary, understated and luxurious. There is a wonderfully grand, double-height lobby, two excellent restaurants (Axis at One Aldwych and Indigo) and two bars, a screening room and a swimming pool with underwater music. The comfortable rooms are decorated in green, red, blue, beige or lilac tones with stone bathrooms and soft carpets.

X-factor The art collection includes more than 400 contemporary pieces: there is one in each guest room. *1 Aldwych, London WC2* (020 7300 1000; www.onealdwych.com). Doubles from £458

EUROPE

★ **The Bulgari Milan 96.92**

Luxury jeweller Bulgari has expanded its stylish brand with this chic, 58-room hotel, which occupies a former 18th-century townhouse at the end of a private, gated road. The beautiful private gardens that surround the property connect with the botanical gardens behind it. Rich, natural materials in shades of brown, cream and white give the rooms – with large beds set on oak floors – an elegant, grown-up feel; the bathroom surfaces include marble and travertine. There's a small spa with a gold mosaic pool and glass hammam, and a Mediterranean restaurant.

X-factor Architect Antonio Citterio has created a sleek and sexy contemporary space with materials such as Zimbabwe black marble

and teak. The imposing, top-floor Bulgari suite has a huge bathtub fashioned from a single block of Turkish Bihara stone.

Via Privata Fratelli Gabba 7/b, Milan, Italy (00 39 02 805 8051; www.bulgarihotels.com). Doubles from €715

★ **Hotel Astoria St Petersburg 96.81**

Within the walls of a grand, 1912 building on St Isaac's Square, opposite the cathedral, the hotel – opened in 2001 – has inserted 211 rooms and suites furnished with brass beds, dark furniture and white marble bathrooms. In 2007, the 650sq ft Ambassador Suites designed by Olga Polizzi were added. The hotel's public spaces are beautifully appointed, notably in the stylish Davidov restaurant (which serves excellent chilled vodka and Russian caviar) and the Rotonda Lounge. Facilities include a Clarins spa with four treatment rooms and a Turkish bath; and the excellent concierge team offers tours of the city and insider tips, as well as booking tables and tickets.

X-factor The hotel's elegant interior style reflects the grandeur of St Petersburg but also blends in contemporary elements, notably in the bedrooms and the Borsalino restaurant, designed by David Collins.

39 Bolshaya Morskaya Ulitsa, St Petersburg, Russia (00 7 812 494 5757; www.thehotelastoria.com). Doubles from 14,000 rubles (about £320)

★ **G Hotel Galway, Ireland 96.01**

This lavish, 101-room hotel in Galway was designed by the milliner Philip Treacy, who was brought up in County Galway. It could hardly be more extravagant, starting with the black glass and shell-shaped white wall at reception and the raspberry carpet that links the three individually themed lounges. The fanciful rooms have shapes and colours inspired by the landscapes and seascapes of Galway; the 'Matz at the g' restaurant, which offers contemporary Italian cuisine, is in purple velvet; the bar is adorned with red Swarovski crystals. Somewhat more restrained is the ESPA spa, which has eight treatment rooms and four beauty suites.

X-factor The design is utterly breathtaking, and resolved down to every exquisite detail. *Wellpark, Galway, County Galway, Ireland* (00 353 91 865 200; www.thehotel.ie). Doubles from €170 ►