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GLOBAL HOTEL DESIGN

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2015



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The Gainsborough

BATH SPA

EPR Architects and Champalimaud Design collaborate to create the UK's first hotel with private access to natural thermal waters.

Words: Catherine Martin | Photography: Courtesy of The Gainsborough

The city of Bath in South West England has been a leisure and wellness destination for over 2,000 years. Ever since the hot springs were discovered bubbling up from the earth's crust, pleasure seekers have flocked to bathe in the mineral-rich waters, thought to have derived from 10,000-year-old rainfall that has seeped beneath the surface and been continually heated by rocks.

In Roman times, the bath complex that was built on the site served as the social hub of the community. Now a major tourist attraction, it is said to be one of the best-preserved bathing houses in Europe.

It is this rich heritage that has inspired the development of The

Gainsborough, billed as the UK's only hotel with private access to natural thermal waters. Part of the YTL Hotels portfolio, the 99-key property occupies two 18th century Grade-II listed buildings, originally the Royal United Hospital and Bellott's Hospital, designed by renowned architect John Pinch. The hospital closed in 1932 and became home to the Bath College of Art & Design – to which the hotel owes its name. Its namesake, Thomas Gainsborough, was a famed portrait artist and central figure in Bath society.

Working in collaboration with a number of specialist contractors, EPR Architects – with a proven track record in restoring heritage



Above: Guestrooms bring together classic design and contemporary luxury, and are flooded with natural light from the 16ft tall windows

buildings – was tasked with converting the then defunct block. Developing a site of such cultural significance brought its own challenges however, not least the fact that excavation work was severely restricted by the remains of the baths beneath. According to project architect Claire Truman, an Associate at EPR, this demanded an innovative design solution for the sub-structure, particularly to the lifts and pool area, the latter of which stands directly above an original Roman mosaic.

The hotel itself is the product of a complex conversion of five buildings. Unifying the different structures, each with their own levels, and converting them within the planning height constraints was no easy feat, says Truman. But the seamless transition between the spaces has been achieved with finesse, barely discernible to the average guest.

As well as the conversion, EPR designed a portion of newbuild, which served both to link the buildings together – via an underpass to the 14-bedroom annex – and rejuvenate the perimeter. The exterior design is further enhanced through new stepped terraces and a sympathetic lighting scheme that highlights the distinguished Georgian and Victorian façades come dusk.

Inside, Alexandra Champalimaud – founder of New York-based Champalimaud Design – has worked wonders to deliver her modern interpretation of a classic design. Having joined forces with YTL Hotels in 2010 for the design of The Green Leaf Niseko Village in Hokkaido, Japan, Champalimaud is familiar with the ethos of the Malaysian management group, and they are clearly enamoured with her understated style.

“I don’t want to embellish things. I don’t want to make them what they are not,” explains Champalimaud of her ethos. And, rather than working to a restrictive brief, she describes how the client put their trust in her to “do what I think is best”. Despite her self-proclaimed strong visual mind, Champalimaud has considered more than just aesthetics. “I look at many factors,” she explains. “Who is the guest? What is the objective? Who is going to run the hotel? What are the room rates? What is the investment? All of these things let me adapt to one thing or another.”

Champalimaud worked within the constraints of the heritage buildings, adapting to their quirks and often-unexpected features. She describes the architecture as having a “strong presence”, and so was mindful not to over-decorate. “We’re not decorators,” she confirms.



Above: In the restaurant, an intimate space partly concealed behind a wine wall features leather armchairs positioned around an open fireplace

“What we do is we design, inspire and provoke. We provide a forum where people can make things their own.”

The resulting design scheme is simple, yet sophisticated, fulfilling Champalimaud’s desire to enable guests to relive the experience of the building in a new way. Georgian characteristics have been retained and are especially evident in the lobby, where a grand staircase ascends to the upper floors of guestrooms. Modern interventions come in the form of a chandelier cascading down from the skylight above, and a stair runner designed by Ulster Carpets. In fact, all of the new furniture and fittings – many of which are bespoke – have been sensitively incorporated, combining classic and contemporary. Even the new signage, by Modulex, features subtle period details.

The hotel’s F&B offer comprises a 94-cover restaurant, a cosy bar, and The Canvas Room – a personal favourite of Champalimaud’s. The lounge, best suited to taking afternoon tea, is more masculine with leather armchairs, framed mirrors and brass detailing. The artwork, here and throughout the public spaces, was commissioned from three students of the Bath College of Art & Design.

For the restaurant, The Gainsborough has partnered Johann Lafer – one of Germany’s most celebrated Michelin-starred chefs

and TV personalities – for his first venture outside the country. Lafer’s gourmet philosophy – dining without borders – combines locally sourced English produce with the very best of Asian flavours to create innovative dishes. Cornish king crab salad is served with a tomato-ginger mousse; salmon is prepared teriyaki and tartare style; and the slow-cooked pork belly is marinated in a honey-soy dressing.

To a backdrop of coffered ceilings and a herringbone floor, the restaurant offers an array of seating options. Taller, communal-style tables are in the centre, while soft banquets nest in windowed niches. There’s also a more intimate space, partly concealed behind a wine wall, where armchairs upholstered in warm butterscotch leather are positioned around an open fireplace.

Continuing the notion of bringing together classic design and contemporary luxury, the beautifully appointed guestrooms are flooded with natural light from the 16ft tall windows, dramatically framed by floor-to-ceiling drapes. A colour palette of Air Force blue and earthy browns complement bespoke features that are the result of exclusive collaborations between Champalimaud and other design specialists. There’s the custom built-in wardrobe inlaid with burl wood; and the two-poster bed with playful antimacassar over the



Above: The spa centres around a double-height glass atrium that encloses the pool to create an internal courtyard

headboard, designed with Kravet to depict a classic pastoral scene.

All guestrooms are unique due to the building's existing layout. Deluxe rooms start at 25m² while the delightful two-bedroom suite is spread across two levels. Uniquely, the exclusive Spa Suites are the only guestrooms in the UK to offer in-room access to the thermal waters via a third tap.

It is these waters that are undoubtedly The Gainsborough's USP. Guests are encouraged to 'take the waters' at the Spa Village, which is inspired by the site's Roman legacy. The complex centres around a double-height glass atrium that encloses the pool to create an internal courtyard. Reviving the ancient practice of social bathing, a one-hour bath circuit takes in a ritualised tour of the thermal pools, saunas, steam room, ice chamber and relaxation rooms – designed and fitted by Dale Sauna in collaboration with Champalimaud and Galliford Try. Respecting tradition, each pool is a few degrees warmer or cooler

than the next and is to be experienced – as they were in Roman times – in sequence. Flanked by Romanesque columns, the main pool features niches clad in custom glass mosaics beneath contemporary interpretations of Georgian lanterns.

On the upper level, 11 private rooms enable therapists to deliver bespoke treatments designed to complement the absorption of the spring's unique mineral composition. There's also a Tatami room featuring a Japanese wooden soaking tub – a nod to the group's Eastern origins.

In homage to the original mosaic found during excavation works – deemed too fragile to restore – a replica was commissioned and now forms a focal point in the spa. A Roman hoard of 17,500 coins was also discovered and is now protected under the 1996 Treasure Act. The valuable find further reinforces the historic significance of the site, a legacy that will live on in The Gainsborough.

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 99 guestrooms | 2 restaurants | 2 bars | 2 meeting rooms | Spa | www.thegainsboroughbathspa.co.uk

Owner: Bath Hotel & Spa B.V. | **Operator:** YTL Hotels | **Architecture:** EPR Architects | **Interior Design:** Champalimaud Design | **Structural Design:** Mann Williams | **Main Contractor:** Galliford Try | **Project Manager:** Wessex Water | **M&E:** B3 Building Services