



# The Gallivanter's Guide

## 100 CLUB

HONEST ADVICE FOR THE WORLD'S TOP TRAVELLERS

**W**hen we started The Gallivanter's Guide back in 1991, most of the hotels and resorts we recommended were independently owned and managed. Of

course, by then, Amanresorts had begun to change the game entirely, and the high-end groups were struggling to keep up. The intervening years meant that names,

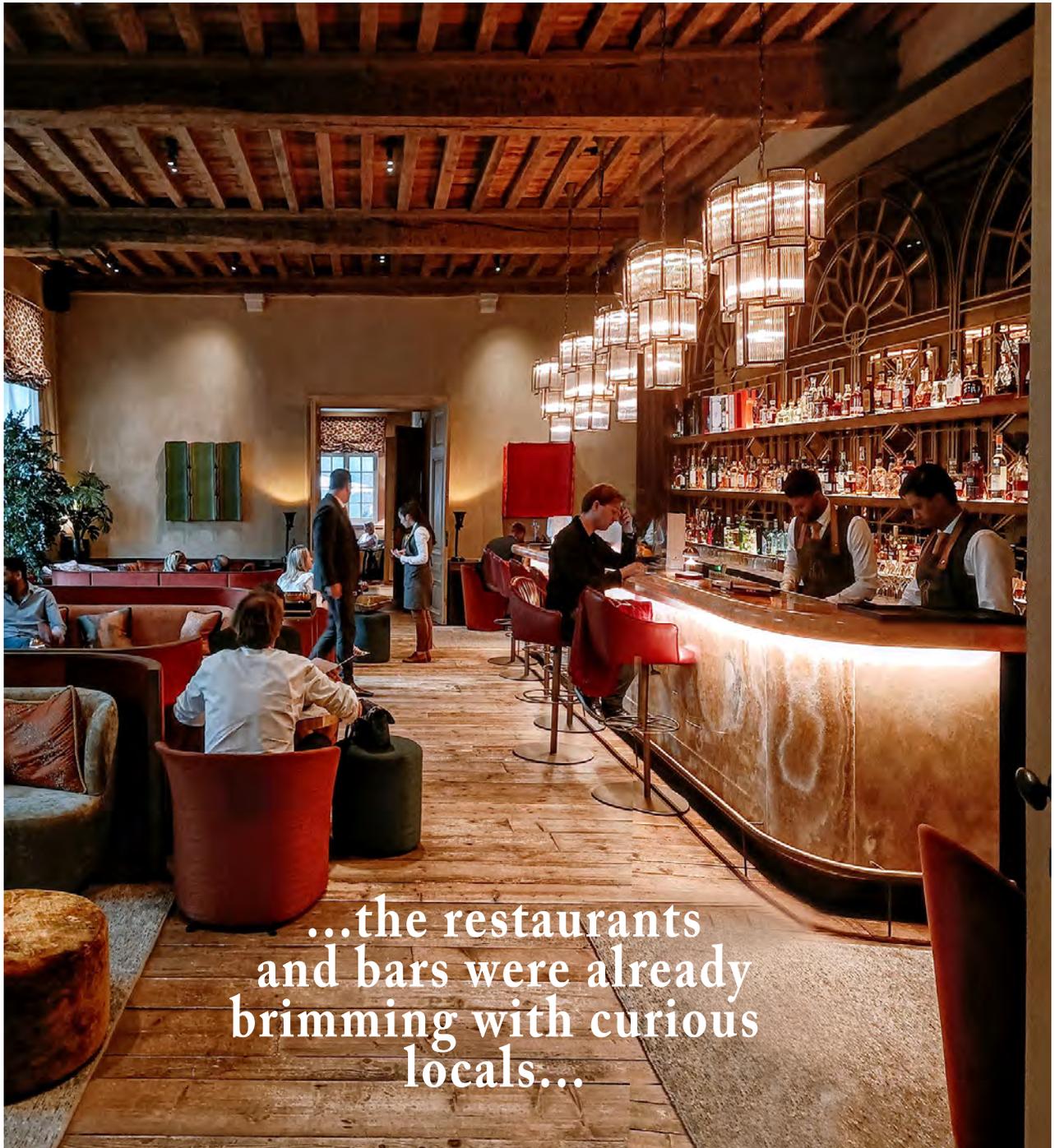
such as Four Seasons, came to the fore, with their supremely comfortable beds that put most independent hotels to shame. However, as hotel groups began to pur-



# Antwerp

*A renaissance of the independent hotelier.*

**THIS MONTH.** Botanic Sanctuary, Antwerp: Page 3. Franq, Antwerp: Page 8.  
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...the restaurants  
and bars were already  
brimming with curious  
locals...

*Henry's Bar, at the newly opened Botanic Sanctuary, Antwerp.*

sue volume rather than quality, we found ourselves suddenly disappointed by those once very reliable high-end groups, and we noticed, more and more, that a new generation of visionaries was emerging; not to create more hotel groups, but to return to the ethic of true hospitality.

Antwerp, Belgium's second largest city, is not, perhaps, an obvious leisure destination; the diamond capital of the world living in the shadow of Brussels, which is just 28 miles away. Besides its diamonds, however, Antwerp has much to offer. Set on the

banks of the Scheldt River, it has one of the world's most beautiful train stations and a Medieval centre anchored by a magnificent Gothic cathedral. An eminently walkable city, Antwerp is dotted with endless examples of Baroque architecture, counterpointed by striking contemporary art and architecture, such as the redeveloped docklands, which showcases the imposing MAS museum, resembling a giant Lego block; or the Port Authority building, designed by the late Zaha Hadid.

Antwerp is also the fashion capital of Bel-

gium, with one of the best fashion design schools in Europe and some of the finest high-end shopping in the country.

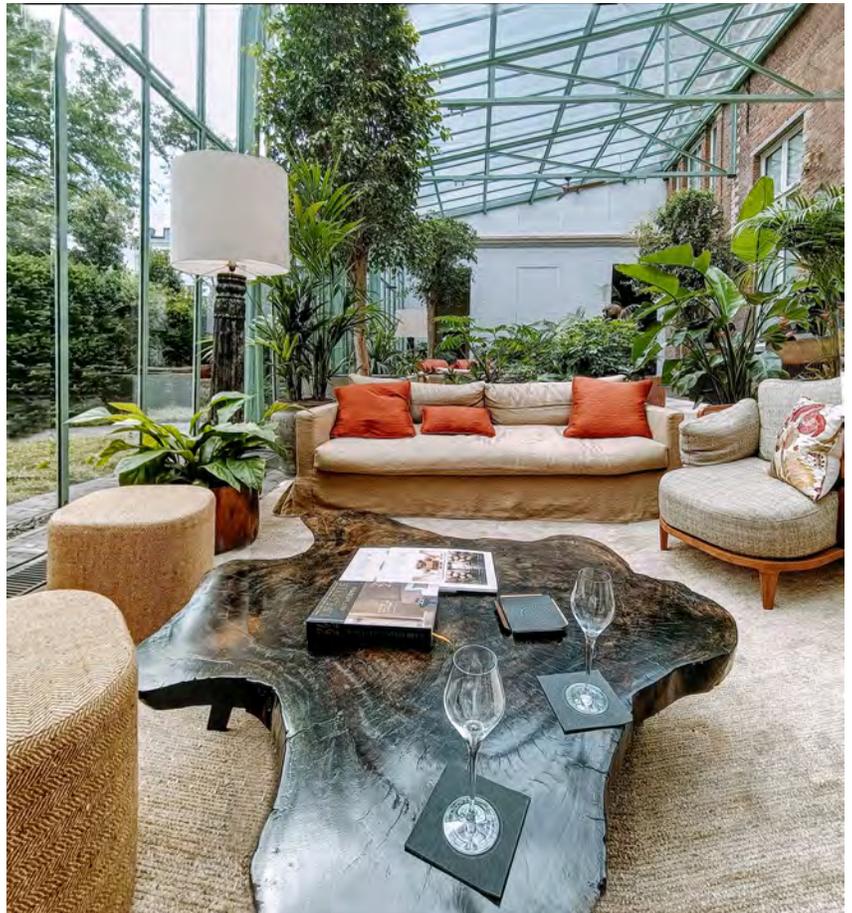
This cosmopolitan city is also fast establishing itself as Belgium's culinary capital, and unlike many European cities, its best hotels are not affiliated with chains; but, as you will discover, are stunning examples of independently managed hospitality, that really give Brussels' often lacklustre hosteleries a run for their money. In a most unlikely location, hospitality appears to be getting back to its roots.

## Botanic Sanctuary.

Barely opened, this high-end independent hotel is the brainchild of Belgian entrepreneur and real estate developer, Eric De Vocht, one of Belgium's wealthiest men. When we stayed here in June, only 68 rooms and suites were open, of a projected 108, which include a very healthy 41 suites. However, the restaurants and bars were already brimming with curious locals, eager to discover this stunning new addition to Antwerp's burgeoning hotel scene.

As we arrived, I could not help but take a quick peek inside the fabulously stylish Henry's Bar, which is a superb venue for a glass of wine, inventive cocktails, or a light lunch. It simply oozes chutzpah, and is the sort of place where I would be happy to spend a relaxing day.

Checking-in is a somewhat unusual experience. A long corridor leads you from the porte cochère to the splendid Lobby, which is housed in a conservatory, filled with full-sized sub-tropical plants and furnished with comfortable sofas and coffee tables carved from oak trees. Here, you are served cold towels, glasses of Champagne and an amuse-bouche, whilst the reception staff, clad in Belgian designer uniforms by Edouard Vermeulen, works on your regis-



*The Lobby, at Botanic Sanctuary, is housed in a plant-filled conservatory.*

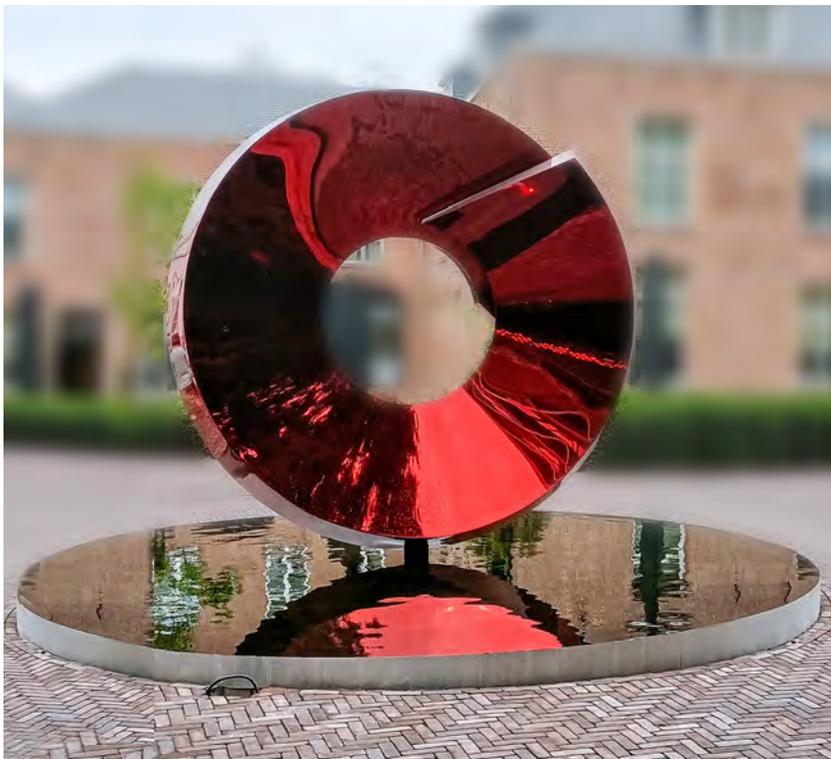
tration details. The whole process is highly personalised, and considering that the hotel had only opened 3 months prior, service,

under Dutch Managing Director, Marc Alofs and his wife Stéfanie Stulens (previously at the helm of Relais & Château's Domaine La Butte aux Bois) was remarkable. Indeed, even my pre-arrival experience was impressive, with an email sent a few days before, and special requests duly recorded and delivered.

During our stay, I only experienced a couple of minor service snags when I tried to figure out various aspects of the in-room technology; but at this stage of the game, such hiccups are eminently forgivable.

Set on a 5-acre historic site, dating back to 1238, this dazzlingly renovated complex comprises a 15th Century monastery, an old hospital, a 14th Century chapel, and several secluded garden courtyards. To add to the allure, the sprawling property borders Antwerp's 200 year old Botanical Garden, which used to supply the adjacent Medieval hospital with medicinal plants.

Spread over five sensitively restored buildings, there is a plethora of accommodation options, cleverly mixing natural materials with contemporary furniture and historical features, such as exposed wooden beams and wrought-iron details. Inspired by the



*A striking sculpture in the arrivals courtyard, at Botanic Sanctuary.*



Japanese wabi-sabi design aesthetic, that celebrates humility and the imperfect beauty of nature, the accommodations combine neutral earth tones, terracotta and a palette of greys, which works superbly.

As only three accommodation wings were open when we stayed, and since no two rooms are alike, at this stage, I cannot advise you on the best options. However, as a rule of thumb, I found the suites here to be extremely good, particularly those in the Monastery wing, which have tons of character and are very spacious.

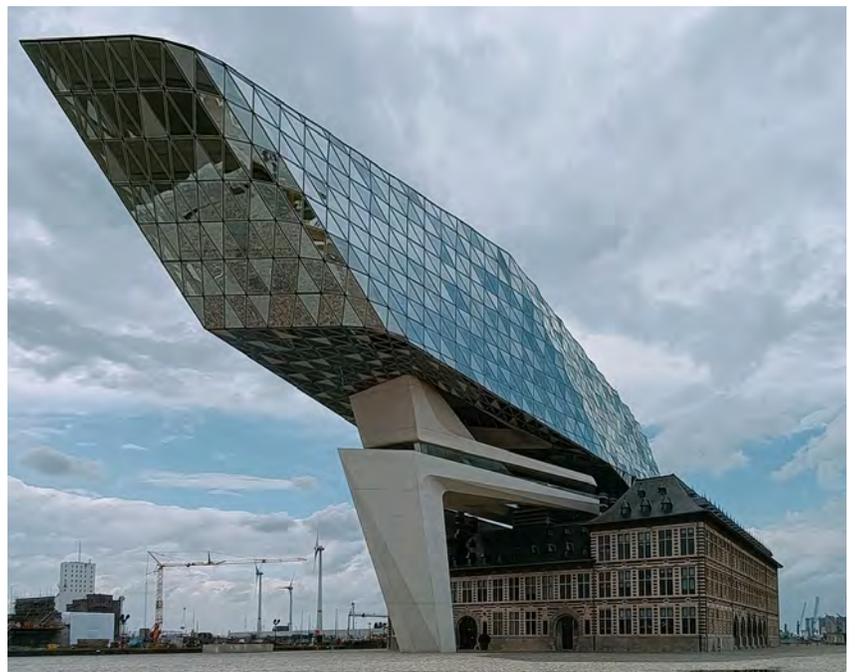
Our airy and wonderfully comfortable 1-bedroom Suite was set beneath the eaves of the Monastery wing. It included a bright, roomy bathroom with separate loo, oversized freestanding tub, and a large walk-in shower, together with a good-sized living room, and a bedroom with a superbly comfortable bed, adorned with ultra-soft De Witte Lietaer linens.

There was an abundance of thoughtful extras, from two well-stocked mini-bars, including a chilled wine cellar stocked with vintage wines and Champagnes, to Sal de Ibiza snacks, striking floral arrangements, a

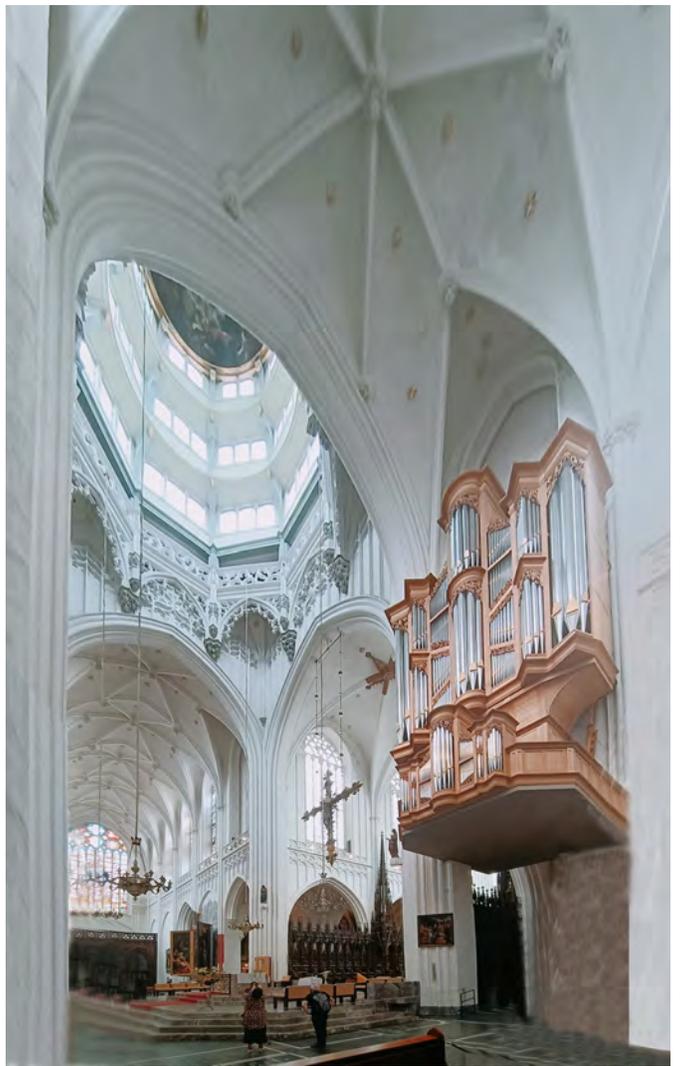
Segafredo Zanetti espresso machine, organic Café Couture teas, and a kettle. Other nice touches included sleeping masks delivered at turndown.

We had issues with the air-conditioning,

as it could not be individually controlled, so changing temperatures required a phone call to the Front Desk, which was quite frustrating. I was assured that this would not be an issue in the future, as this was



*Antwerp's Port Authority building, by the late Zaha Hadid.*



*Antwerp's Cathedral of Our Lady, which took 169 years to build; the first stage revealed in 1521.*

just a temporary teething problem.

liked the large second floor two-bedroom Suites, such as Grande Suite #M112, which

is accessed via a small staircase or elevator from the entrance foyer. Set under the eaves,



*The light-filled pool in the Botanic Health Spa, at Botanic Sanctuary.*



*Set under the eaves, Suite #M220, at Botanic Sanctuary.*

it features two bathrooms, a small walk-in closet, and a particularly attractive high-ceilinged sitting area. One of the quirks of this suite is that it can also be accessed via the garden through a secret door.

Another wonderful option is the equally attractive two-bedroom Grande Suite, #M014, which is ideal if you are travelling with children, as the second bedroom features two bunk beds and its own bathroom. Highlights of this suite include handsome wood and terracotta tiled floors, fireplace, a huge shower-only master bathroom, and a very attractive furnished terrace.

Slightly smaller, but equally attractive, is the one-bedroom Suite, #M016, which features a small walk-in closet and a spacious patio.

If you are looking for something more streamlined and slightly more contemporary, then consider a suite in the Alnetum building, where even a Junior Suite works very well; in particular, the splendid first floor

Junior Suite, #A107, which features a striking yellow sofa, tropical plants and a fabulous terrace, with table, chairs and two sun loungers.

A couple of Spa Suites will be launched shortly, and although I did not see them, they promise to be rather exciting, as they include jacuzzis, saunas, treatment tables, Technogym stationary bikes, air filters and purification systems.

Botanic Sanctuary is also a foodie's paradise, with no less than four heavyweight restaurants and one bar, offering some of the finest cuisine in the city.

The height of culinary excellence is to be found in the 2-star Michelin, Hertog Jan, headed by Chef, Gert de Mangeleer and Sommelier Joachim Boudens, who decided to start all over again in Antwerp after closing their previous flagship restaurant, near Bruges.

Book early, as this intimate eatery, housed in a renovated barn just outside the main

building, boasts only five tables and is open for just two weeks each month, which means that you are guaranteed to have the Chef in the kitchen. The minimalist décor and menu reflect the Chef's passion for everything Japanese, with an emphasis on Omakase-style dining.

From the same team, you should not miss Bar Bulot, with its simple yet stylish white and blue nautical décor. This modern urban brasserie serves updated Belgian favourites, such as Vol-au-Vent and filet Américain (the Belgian steak tartare), together with impossibly crispy hand-cut Bulot fries, beautifully and ironically presented on stylish Japanese porcelain. Service was professional, albeit a tad slow at the end, and the wine list featured some unusual and interesting vintages by the glass.

Fine Fleur is the hotel's one-Michelin restaurant, lead by two creative Dutch-born Chefs, Jacob Jan Boerma and Thomas Diepersloot. You can choose between a 4-5 or 6 course tasting menu, with inspired dishes served directly to your table by the kitchen staff. Service was well-paced, dietary restrictions were carefully considered, and the duo's interpretation of French-Belgian cuisine was nothing short of captivating, showcasing their inventive use of super-fresh local produce.

Meanwhile, back at the Monastery wing, the 1238 restaurant, named for the date when the Monastery was founded, is set in a romantic conservatory overlooking a serene courtyard. It serves modern Franco-Belgian cuisine, conceived by Chef, Wouter Van Tichelen, who aims to regain his Michelin star here. The focus is on an array of sauces and top notch local produce.



*Bathroom of Suite, #M220, at Botanic Sanctuary.*



*Bedroom of Suite, #M220, at Botanic Sanctuary.*

An imaginative breakfast buffet, complemented by various à la carte dishes, is served in the Catalpa; the hotel's stunning breakfast room. The fare here is superb; a flourish of both quality and variety, with plenty of Belgian produce. The décor, atmosphere and service are equally top notch, with Nicolas Feuillate Blanc de Blancs 2015 Champagne regularly replenished by the ultra-attentive staff. On weekends, a lavish brunch is served to the sound of a harpist, under the soaring arches of the Amaryllis Hall (see front cover).

What is extraordinary here is that five award-winning Chefs and four of the best restaurants in Antwerp are all to be found under one roof; a unique culinary opportunity for foodies.

On top of this, there is a 3-floor Botanic Spa, which is beautifully designed by Belgian interior design firm, AIDarchitecten. The look is decidedly monastic, with 10 treatment rooms, including 2 for couples, with half of them opening onto a covered terrace that overlooks the hotel's herb garden. Additional facilities include a steam room,

panoramic Finnish sauna, a herbal textil-sauna, thermal zone with a Kneipp walk, ice fountain, and a salt and mineral sauna. If that was not enough, there is also a light-filled Technogym health club, a herb and vitamin Bar, and a Spa Bistro.

The jewel in the crown of this unique sanctuary is the striking 59-foot pool and jacuzzi on the top floor; both set under a glass canopy roof and affording leafy views of the Botanical gardens.

Although you will not find any chemical-free skincare products here, some brands are marginally better than most. Aside from regular massages and treatments, you can also indulge in an extensive menu of multi-day programmes and wellness retreats that can be customised to suit your needs. These include Pilates, yoga, and mindfulness,



*Monastery wing, at Botanic Sanctuary,*

alongside personalised nutritional plans.

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this Spa is its use of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which sits happily with Traditional European Medicine, and utilises the healing powers of medicinal herbs, under the supervision of in-house practitioner, Xavier Le Clef.

Elsewhere in the hotel you will discover a couple of boutiques, an art gallery and even a herbal apothecary, which is set within the Monastery's former pharmacy. Meanwhile, hidden from sight, deep within the vaults of the hotel, you will find The Unprecedented, an ultra-exclusive whiskey bar, which is only accessible by invitation.

With 18 conference rooms, the hotel is



*Fine Fleur, the Michelin-starred restaurant, at Botanic Sanctuary.*

obviously trying to appeal to the convention crowd, which is something to bear in mind. However, although I noticed a function and a wedding taking place during our stay, none of this intruded on the overall experience; so it could be that the hotel has this side of things equally well organised as everything else.

The only aspect of my stay that was def-

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## The most enjoyable hotel stays are not always the most expensive...

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initely not high-end was the 11 am check-out time, which would be acceptable in a 3-star hotel, but not in a property of this calibre. Let us hope they rectify this shortly.

Botanic Sanctuary's location is also a great lure, with all the best high-end shops literally steps away, and nearly everything of note in town within reasonable walking distance. However, given the very high standard of everything in this striking new property, I found myself with very little incentive to leave the hotel grounds.

Has Belgium finally got the high-end hotel it deserves? I certainly think so.

[botanicantwerp.be](http://botanicantwerp.be)

*Gallivanter's Rating: ★★★★★*

### Hotel Franq.

The most enjoyable hotel stays are not always the most expensive, which is a case in point when it comes to this great value Relais & Châteaux property. It derives its name from Belgium's pre-Euro currency, the Franc, which is a very fitting choice, as this stylish hotel is housed within a handsome neoclassical 18th Century building that was once home to the National Bank.

Many original architectural elements have been maintained and restored, and you can still take a look at the original vault, which was transformed into a strikingly original wine cellar.

At the heart of the hotel lies a stately white marble lobby, enfolded by tall columns. This warm yet elegant sitting room combines

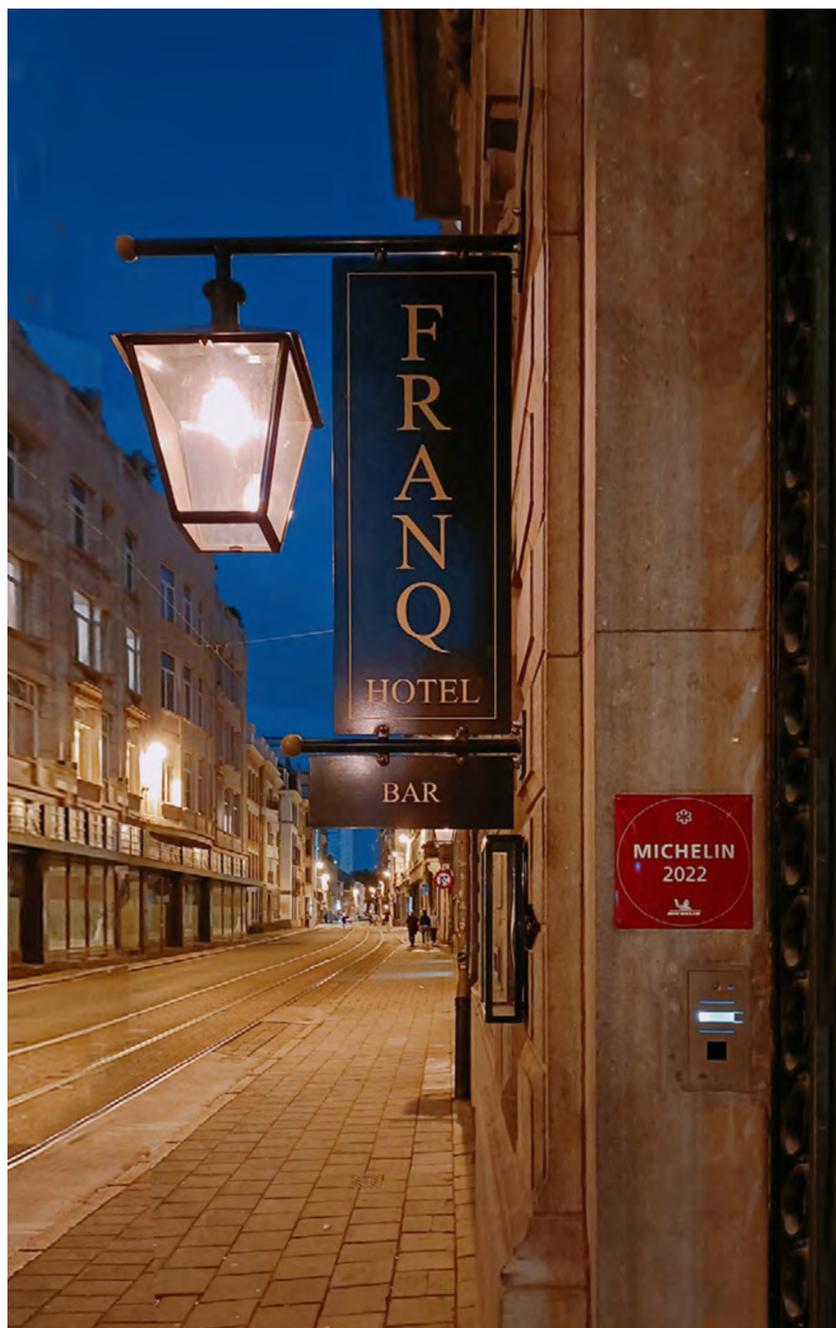
mid-Century with modern furniture, brightly coloured velvet sofas, quality contemporary artworks and a discreet hint of Chinoiserie, and proved to be a very welcoming space that inspired us to linger; our check-in accompanied by a complimentary glass or two of chilled sparkling wine.

Above the majestic lobby is a light-filled mezzanine, furnished with comfy chairs and sofas; ideal if you are looking for a serene spot to read a book or simply gaze at one of the elevated outdoor gardens, which are planted with mature olive trees.

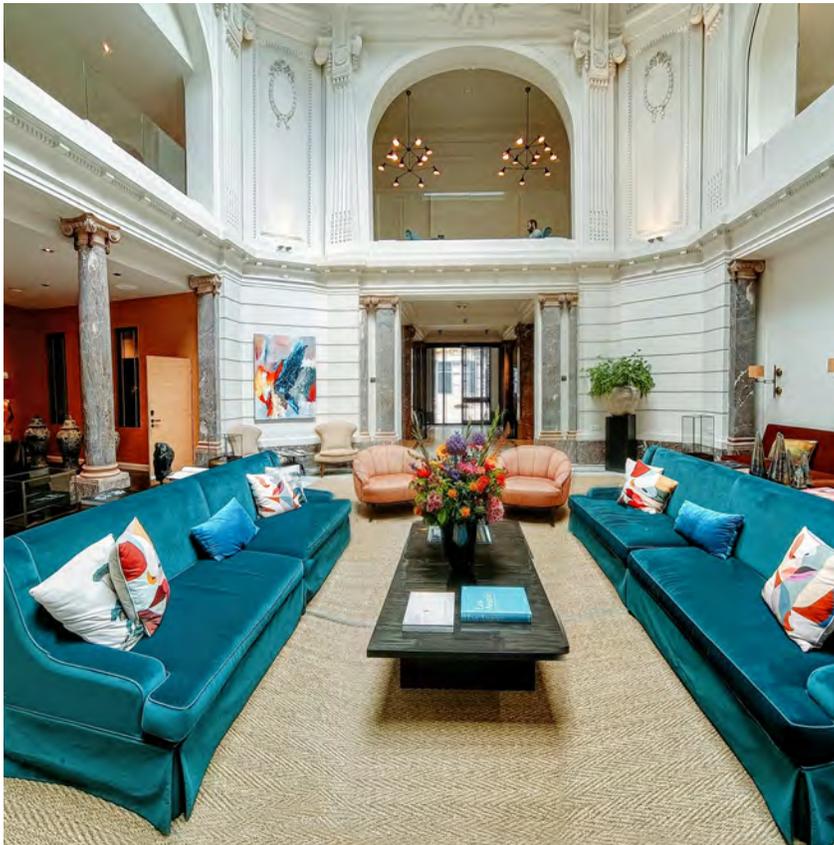
The 39 rooms are divided between the original building and a modern annexe at

the rear, and are decorated in a much more understated style than the public areas; almost edging towards minimalism. Think pale wooden floors, contemporary black and white artworks, orange velvet-upholstered chairs, and colourful cushions plumped on the extra-long Hypnos beds, which are adorned with Belgian De Witte Lietaer linens.

Technology comes in the form of a vintage Bluetooth Marshall radio, fast password-free wifi, blissfully quiet air-conditioning and a 48" smart TV. There is a Nespresso machine, a safe and complimentary filtered water in the otherwise empty minibar.



*The discreet entrance to Hotel Franq, at 10 Kipdorp in Antwerp; once home to the National Bank.*



*The elegant yet welcoming Lobby, at Hotel Franq.*

Although the uncluttered look works well in the smallish Deluxe room category (particularly if you opt for one of the larger versions, such as #111, #211 or #311), I found our Junior Suite, #216, to be under-furnished. Indeed, I wished that they had added a

console at the entrance and maybe a sofa and a coffee table in the bedroom. There was certainly enough space. Much nicer was the pebbled accent wall in the massive Zen-like bathroom, which featured a deep free-standing tub and a large walk-in rain-

fall shower, plus a pretty antique wooden bench. Bathroom amenities included The White Company toiletries in large dispensers, bathrobes and stylish black slippers. The only other Junior Suite is #316, which, although identical in layout and style, has lower ceilings and features exposed wood beams and an interesting, angled skylight in its equally spacious bathroom.

The best rooms, in my view, are the two 485 sq ft first floor Luxury Suites, #103 and #106, which are located at the rear of the hotel. Both feature a separate sitting area with two chairs and a sofa.

However, the true calling card of this property is its Michelin-starred cuisine, by Chef, Tim Meuleneire. This inspired Belgian Chef brings subtle Mediterranean references to classic French-Belgian dishes, which are served in a bright contemporary dining room, where a striking wall of Henri Rousseau inspired wallpaper, immediately draws the eye.

In summer, you can also dine on the restaurant's sunny, secluded terrace, that faces one of Antwerp's oldest houses; its well-preserved interior walls decorated with stunning Delft tiles. These days, the house is used as meeting space; but will soon be transformed into a speakeasy bar, which I think is a brilliant idea, given its atmospheric setting.

Although there are tempting à la carte



*Franq Gastrobar, at Hotel Franq, where you can also enjoy Chef, Tim Meuleneire's cuisine.*



*Tim Meuleneire's gastronomic Franq Restaurant; the quality of which permeates the entire hotel.*



options, we decided to choose one of the tasting menus, which proved to be a savvy choice. Highlights of our gastronomic journey included a raft of delicious amuse bouches, supremely good codfish served with

white asparagus and cumin, and a mango and passion fruit dessert, exotically named Bora Bora, that was so delicious that I wished I had the skills to recreate it at home.

In keeping with the subtle banking theme,

petits fours and mignardises were beautifully presented on an antique safe door.

Ultra-attentive service by an all-female team, and an exhaustive wine list, that includes surprisingly good Belgian wines, such as a Valke Vleug Pinot Auxerois 2019 from the Antwerp region, truly enhance the entire experience.

If you are in the mood for something more casual, you can also sample the Chef's bravura cuisine in the adjacent FRANQ Gastrobar. Here, you will find a short sea-



*Classic Room, #206, at Hotel Franq.*

sonal menu, with staples such as salads and pasta dishes, together with more original offerings, such as a juicy Coucou de Malines, which is a succulent type of local chicken, served Albufeira style.

Breakfast, which is set in the main restaurant, comprises a fairly modest Contin-

the basement; but no spa.

The best thing to do is rent one of the hotel's bicycles, as Antwerp is a very bike-friendly city, and this is by far the nicest way to discover it. Although there is little of interest in the immediate vicinity, the old city centre is a short walk away, with



*The Zen-like bathroom of Junior Suite, #216, at Hotel Franq.*

ental buffet, with good mini-pastries, organic preserves and juices, complemented by a short selection of cook-to-order egg dishes.

There is a diminutive wellness suite in

the unmissable Saint Charles Borromeo Baroque church just around the corner.

This is a 4-star hotel; so do not expect lavish in-room welcome amenities, elaborate turndowns, or even a shoeshine ser-



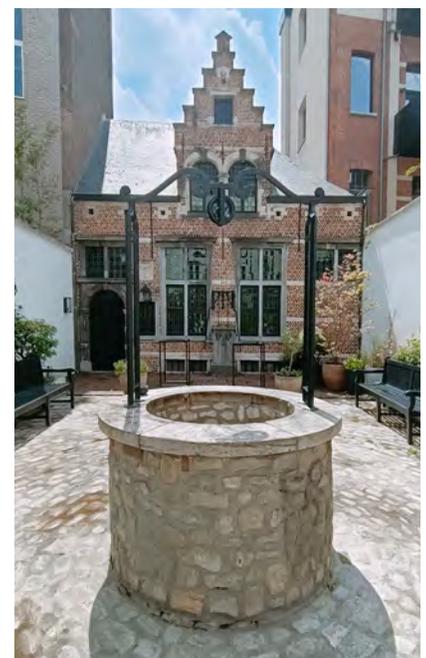
*Corner of the Lobby, at Hotel Franq.*

vice (there is a machine downstairs). However, what you can expect is smart, caring hospitality under ebullient General Manager, Christel Cabanier, who is managing her first boutique hotel after becoming tired of "dealing with Excel sheets in larger hotel chains".

Historic on the outside and contemporary on the inside, this unpretentious hide-away might not tick all the boxes in terms of hard product; but it is an excellent option if you relish great cuisine, character, and personable service.

[hotelfranq.com](http://hotelfranq.com)

**Gallivanter's Rating: ★★★★★**



*Hotel terrace, with one of Antwerp's oldest houses.*



Gallivanter's

# Gossip

**THE ITALIAN DOLOMITES** continue to intrigue you, so here is a very elegant gem, recommended by a Member. **Alpina Dolomites Lodge & Spa** (no



relation to Alpina Gstaad) sits on a high-altitude plateau that is the largest in Europe. This young, sister hotel to the 1923, Gardena Grödnerhof, which has been owned for four generations by the same family, is a celebration of great design, which mirrors the jagged peaks of the region. It majors on wellness, with a serious COMO Shambhala Retreat at its core, together with a very high standard of cuisine. [alpinadolomites.it](http://alpinadolomites.it)



**HAS BALI HAD ITS DAY?** Maybe not, as I just heard that ex-Aman, **Astrid Killian**, is the new General Manager of Soo K. Chan's **Soori Bali**. This architectural jewel is tucked away on the edge of the ocean, between rice terraces and Mount Batukaru and, with just 48 pool villas, is a welcome and very authentic alternative to the big names. [sooribali.com](http://sooribali.com)

**ONE OF MY FAVOURITE UK COUNTRY HOUSE HOTELS** has just become considerably more relevant to Members. **The Newt in Somerset** just opened a splendid **Gate Lodge** on the estate (see right); private house accommodation with two bedrooms/bathrooms, kitchen and sitting room. A private parking space, golf buggy and bicycles ensure easy access to all areas of the property. [thenewtinsomerset.com](http://thenewtinsomerset.com)



**DOHA CAN BE A BIT HIT-AND-MISS WHEN IT COMES TO RESORTS**, so I was very encouraged to see that GHM are coming to Qatar, with the opening of **The Chedi Katara Hotel & Resort** in the Katara Cultural Village; scheduled for the end of this year. With a beachfront setting, the resort will have 59 rooms and suites; all with sea views, together with 32 Villas. Designed by WATG and Wimberly Interiors, this promises to be a truly elegant, Mughal-inspired property, with a very high level of finish. Definitely one to watch.

**I HAVE BEEN ALARMED BY THE NUMBER OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT** leaving **Four Seasons** of late. After 27 years, **Alex Porteous** has quit Four Seasons Kuala Lumpur to join InterContinental Hotel Osaka, replaced by Blaise Montandon, who did such an excellent job with Four Seasons in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the superb long-serving Regional Vice President, **Dimitrios Zarikos**, who has been with Four Seasons for 25 years, latterly overseeing Egypt and Greece, leaves the group in November. Zarikos will become CEO of ORA Hospitality; a new company by Egyptian billionaire, Naguib Sawiris, based in Cairo. Under the **Silversands** brand, over 20 properties are in the pipeline, from Grenada (where the resort is already open - [silversandsgrenada.com](http://silversandsgrenada.com)) to Mykonos, Dubai, Dakar and Madagascar; so lots of new destinations to explore.

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