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SQUARE NINE
A BELGRADE BOUTIQUE
WITH BRAZILIAN FLAIR

ERIK NISSEN JOHANSEN • PALAIS NAMASKAR - MARRAKECH • GEORGES - ISTANBUL • ENDEMICO

This new hotel in the vibrant Serb capital sees architect Isay Weinfeld mix indigenous wood finishes from his native Brazil with nautical antiques and mid-century Scandinavian furnishings.

Square Nine

Belgrade

Words: Matt Morley Photography: Matthieu Salvaing

The Balkans may not be the first place many of us think of when looking for innovative hospitality projects but this corner of post-conflict Europe is slowly putting itself back on the map. While Croatia has its coastline tourism, Serbia has a gritty yet undeniably buzzy capital that is widely regarded as the region's business and design hub.

So if a boutique luxury hotel was to pop up anywhere in the Balkans, it was always going to be in Belgrade. That, however, is the only predictable thing about the 45-guestroom Square Nine Hotel.

Perfectly positioned between the increasingly trendy Dorcol neighbourhood and the main shopping precinct, "the location couldn't have been better" according to the affable co-owner Nebojsa Kostic.

"We decided many years ago to construct a hotel on this site as Belgrade fundamentally lacked hotel capacity, especially in the five-star segment".

Even today, after starting the project in 2005 and opening in February 2011, they are "proud to be the only independent five-star hotel in the city rather than a member of a corporate chain," says Kostic.

Square Nine simply doesn't do corporate, especially in an era of austerity. Rumours of an astronomical spend per key may be exaggerated but it doesn't take a design buff to pick up on the impeccable attention to detail applied throughout the five-storey building.

Enter Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld, who was drafted in by the owners after being inspired by his Fasano hotels in Brazil. "We knew he was the right architect for us, we especially liked his combination of understated elegance, antique pieces and dedication to comfort," says Kostic.

Taking care of both the architecture and interiors, Weinfeld and his collaborator Domingos Pascali began with a striking Asian Gold limestone exterior façade that blends into an off-white, smooth stucco finish ▶

OPPOSITE PAGE: The hotel has a striking facade of Asian gold limestone blending into an off-white smooth stucco finish punctured with window apertures in Brazilian ipe wood





► peppered with Brazilian ipe wood panels framing the street-facing window apertures.

The Brazilian wood theme continues in the ground floor communal areas where embuia and pau-ferro combine with Crema Europa limestone flooring, antiques sourced from London and New York, as well as vintage Danish modern and mid-century American furniture.

It was the wood that required the greatest allocation of resources however. "Having all our woodwork done in Brazil and then bringing those artisans to Belgrade for a year was a real challenge," according to Kostic.

A symphony of tonal browns, yellows and beiges dominate the lobby, lounge bar and restaurant. Gold onyx makes an appearance on the reception desk and lobby bar top, cleverly offset against a neutral beige backdrop in the case of the former and more Brazilian wood in the latter. Strategic lighting then

serves to accentuate these subtle contrasts between materials and finishes.

Antique globes, nautical accessories, carpets and cushions scattered liberally around the ground floor spaces help guests feel at ease, despite the intricately planned nature of the layout. Vintage black and white photographs then line the structural pillars that connect dining room with bar, offering glimpses of 19th century Belgrade and a strong visual clue to the location's past.

A similar approach is taken on each of the five landings adjacent to the lifts where different furniture pieces, from a curved wooden high-backed bench to mid-century Scandinavian chairs, gently proffer themselves as informal waiting areas. More of those classic photos lining the walls and a concealed office for a babushka character both give further hints of Belgrade's socialist-communist history. ►

ABOVE: Public areas feature Brazilian woods such as embuia and pau ferro, combined with antique rugs, nautical ephemera and vintage mid-century modern Danish and American furniture