

OLD AND NEW WORLD CHARM

In keeping with the inventive and enduring spirit that's a signature of Britain's only city to be listed as a full UNESCO World Heritage Site, The Gainsborough Bath Spa opens its doors and invites you in to discover a new yet old world of experiences, pleasure and luxury.

Text **Kim Inglis**

The imposing front façade of The Gainsborough Bath Spa, with its four-column portico, is as architecturally striking today as when it was built in 1826. Honey-coloured Bath stone is beautifully restored here.

In the same way that the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the city of Bath is an amalgam of historic eras and sites, so is the newly opened The Gainsborough Bath Spa. A 99-room five-star hotel operated by YTL Hotels, it opened its doors for business on 1 July 2015. The hotel's architectural roots lie in — or rather on — antiquity, more specifically on an original Roman bathhouse upon which the city was founded. Above these are 19th-century vaults, a Georgian building

with a Grade II-listed façade, additional Victorian wings and, nearby, an Elizabethan house.

As if that were not enough, there's a newly built wing and, at the hotel's centre, a natural thermal spa with three therapeutic pools set in a soaring, light-filled glass atrium. In many ways, this space — designed with the Roman history of Bath in mind, with blue and grey mosaic tiles, Romanesque columns and sparkling water — is the architectural 'glue' that holds the disparate buildings together. If this sounds like a hotchpotch, it isn't. Somehow, the hotel becomes more than the sum of its parts, as one space flows into the next. Certainly, the strong contemporary-styled interiors (which still give more than a nod to tradition) anchor the various elements, as does the efficient and friendly staff. There's a formality and calmness within the hotel, which is underpinned by the architectural features — high ceilings, tall wooden sash windows, symmetry and a notable lack of ornamentation.

The original buildings, and the one new wing, are all clad in local honey-toned Bath stone, giving the hotel a bold, if somewhat austere, exterior. Entry to the lobby is at the main building that originally housed a hospital and was built in 1826 in a design set by John Pinch the Elder. Featuring 11 bays with a four-column attached portico and pediment, it has been





“DO NOT LEAVE DORMANT IN YOUR STORE THAT WHICH WOULD RELIEVE THE POOR. IF THE POOR SLEEP SOUNDLY, SO WILL YOU.”



restored to its original grandeur. Adjacent is the Albert Wing, built in 1864 and so named after the deceased Prince Consort. It was designed by local Bath architect, John Elkington Gill, who also added a chapel.

These two buildings are linked by an underground walkway to the Bellott's annex, the oldest of the three edifices. First mentioned in 1608, it was built as an almshouse by one Thomas Bellott for poor visitors seeking treatment at one of the various bathhouses. Even though it was remodelled during Victorian times, its façade still bears the coat of arms of Bellott's master, William Cecil, Lord

Burghley, and a Latin inscription reading: "Do not leave dormant in your store that which would relieve the poor. If the poor sleep soundly, so will you." Fittingly, this 14-guestroom annex with private court garden may be hired out in its entirety. Even though it is attached to the rest of the hotel, it has its own private entrance and offers a degree of intimacy.

The public spaces and 99 rooms and suites have been conceptualised and appointed by Champalimaud Design, a New York-based company known for its award-winning work on properties such as The Carlyle in New York, The Dorchester in

Left to right: An internal corridor in the hotel is calm and cool with geometric marble floors and a pale palette; the relaxation area for post-treatment pampering overlooks the main thermal pool beneath a glass roof; the Albert Wing façade dates from 1856 and this addition blends harmoniously with the original hospital building.

spaces. To sum up, she notes: "What we like to create is a project that's ahead of its time, unusual, with a deep soul, and reminiscent of the past in some way."

When the company was drilling underground to build the basement spa, it found some ancient Roman mosaics and 17,500 Roman coins, some of which are now displayed in the lobby. These had to be assessed and analysed by heritage experts, which caused some delays. Nevertheless, even though the foundations were eventually sealed beneath the surface, their traces remain embedded in the design of the basement spa. Not only is the special pre-treatment thermal water journey one that respects the Roman tradition of sequential temperature bathing, the spa's tranquil relaxation chamber features a reproduction of the Roman mosaic floor and cloistered arched niches for lounging pre- or post-bathing.

It is this attention to history, styled in a contemporary manner, that gives the hotel its strong identity. A few artworks were commissioned from students of the Bath School of Art & Design, an establishment that, at one stage, occupied the building pre-restoration but, for the most part, the interiors are remarkably uncluttered. In the lobby, a striking cascading lamp sculpture descends from an oculus at the top of an elegant historic central staircase to the lower basement level, but that notwithstanding, the rest of the space is clean-lined and collected in cool tones of grey and taupe. Elsewhere, *Gentry Blue*, a 'Georgian' blue/grey tone, covers restaurant and guestroom walls, allowing the huge windows to dominate — and invite in views of the honey-coloured city and the green hills beyond.

London and The Liberty in Boston. The latter was a former jail, illustrating that the company is *au fait* with adaptive re-use projects.

Its main principal, Alexandra Champalimaud, describes the company's ethos as forward-thinking. "There has to be a modern context and a sense of dimension — more aspirational and exciting than ever before — yet entirely comfortable and user-friendly at the end of the day." She elaborates that things have to work, there has to be a sense of ease, comfort and quiet in the rooms, yet a vibrancy and excitement in the public

All 99 guest rooms and suites are different, each individually designed according to the original layout of the buildings. Many have incredibly high ceilings and massive Georgian windows, while there is also a duplex and a couple of rooms with interlinking balconies overlooking the spa. Local scenes are celebrated in the black and white toile antimacassars depicting playful bathing



“IT IS THIS ATTENTION TO HISTORY, STYLED IN A CONTEMPORARY MANNER, THAT GIVES THE HOTEL ITS STRONG IDENTITY.”

Above: The Guest Relations Manager and Head Concierge greet guests on arrival. Left: An unusual breakfast dish at the hotel restaurant comprises a Bavarian sausage and giant pretzel accompanied by mustard. Opposite top left: The bartender prepares a specially smoked cocktail for a guest.

Opposite top right: The Canvas Room hosts bubbles and cheeseboard in the early evenings. It is the perfect place to relax after a day of sightseeing. Opposite bottom: A suite, in a 'Georgian' tone of blue/grey, features a bedroom on the left and sitting room on the right. Tall ceilings and expansive sash windows bring in light and views.





Spa Village Bath is, undoubtedly, one of the hotel's strengths. With a thermal water journey, exotic treatments and personalised pampering, it is also beautifully designed.

activities draped over headboards, while a retro Roberts radio and Asprey bathroom products add a refined British flavour. The Sealy beds and Egyptian cotton sheets are also very comfortable.

Public spaces are no less impressive. In addition to the lobby, there is an attractive lounge that hosts afternoon teas and drinks and cheeseboard in the early evenings. Aptly named The Canvas Room after the British painter, Sir Thomas Gainsborough, it is quintessentially British in style. A stylish bar and striking restaurant are similarly inviting; the 94-seat dining room is warmly appointed with butterscotch-coloured leather seating, herringbone floors and high ceilings. There's a dramatic semi-transparent wine cellar wall that breaks up the space at one end, while a large mural by one of the college students dominates the opposite end. It's a space that invites conversation and interaction, yet there's a degree of formality as well.

Conference and banqueting facilities are particularly notable at The Gainsborough Bath Spa. The Somerset Room, with a half-shell area and room to seat close to 100 people, is ideal for weddings and the like; it has an impeccable period atmosphere. For larger events, look to The Chapel. Beautifully appointed, with an exquisite silk awning beneath the ceiling, The Chapel has an adjacent outdoor terrace that doubles its capacity and is perfect for summer events. A short walk from the hotel, one will find Hetting House, the last remaining Elizabethan mansion in Bath. Here, the Great Room, the only room of importance that has escaped various renovations and bombings, has been transformed into conference chambers. With fine wainscoting and an original 9ft wide x 14ft high chimney-piece, it features elaborate carving and heraldic details.

As if these were not enough, the hotel has one more trick up its sleeve — additional accommodation in a secluded townhouse round the corner. Believed to date from around 1590, 3 Hetting Court oozes period character and charm, but has been recently renovated to include everything the modern traveller may require. A thoroughly contemporary luxury retreat with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, it also has a fully functioning kitchen. Each floor is different with each room revealing a different colour



The spa reception mimics the design of an apothecary of old. Guests are given a bespoke bag of perfumed salts, assembled in front of them to their specification and likes, before embarking on their aquatic adventure.

scheme behind original wooden doors. It is the perfect bijoux bolthole for a family or group of up to five people who desire the utmost privacy, but also wish to use the hotel facilities.

In addition to its superb facilities and luxe interior decoration, The Gainsborough Bath Spa has the privilege of being the only hotel in Britain with a direct link to mineral-rich thermal waters. It also boasts an advantageous location, is close to the Roman Baths area, the abbey and shops, and is only five minutes' walk from Bath Spa railway station. Each year, about four and a half million visitors flock to Bath to enjoy the city's historic architecture and soak in its healing thermal waters. Now, they will be able to sample a meal or drink, take in a spa treatment, or stay overnight at its newest five-star attraction. With its timeless atmosphere and impeccable service, The Gainsborough Bath Spa is a welcome addition to the city. ■