

# Finding the Soul of Discretion in Brussels

*Playing on Its Racy Past, a Former Hotel Rendezvous Reopens as a Deluxe Belgian Hideaway*

By FRANCES ROBINSON



Marie-Françoise Plissart

The reception area has intimate alcoves and quirky decor, such as metal palm-tree lamps.

Brussels's hotel scene has plenty of options. The presence of European Union institutions means international chains in glass-and-steel edifices are well-represented, while the Grand Place and its chocolate shops have plenty of five-star offerings.



Marie-Françoise Plissart

Exterior of the hotel

But for a country known for its Surrealists, there's never been a hotel with the kookiness of the Mannekin-Pis or the retro-futurist charm of the Atomium—until now, with the February reopening of Hotel Le Berger, a 1930s *hotel de rendezvous* restored into a flirtatious destination in the lively Ixelles district.

"It was Isabelle Léonard who called me, pleading that we should save it from being knocked down," Jean Michel André, co-owner of Le Berger, says referring to the cultural preservation consultant. "I'd looked at it a couple of years earlier," he adds while pulling a *pintje* of beer in the hotel bar, where coquettish pictures that originally adorned bedrooms now hang. "The building was in a terrible state, but she persuaded me to make the effort."

The hotel was built in 1935 as a special type of hostelry where signs forbid

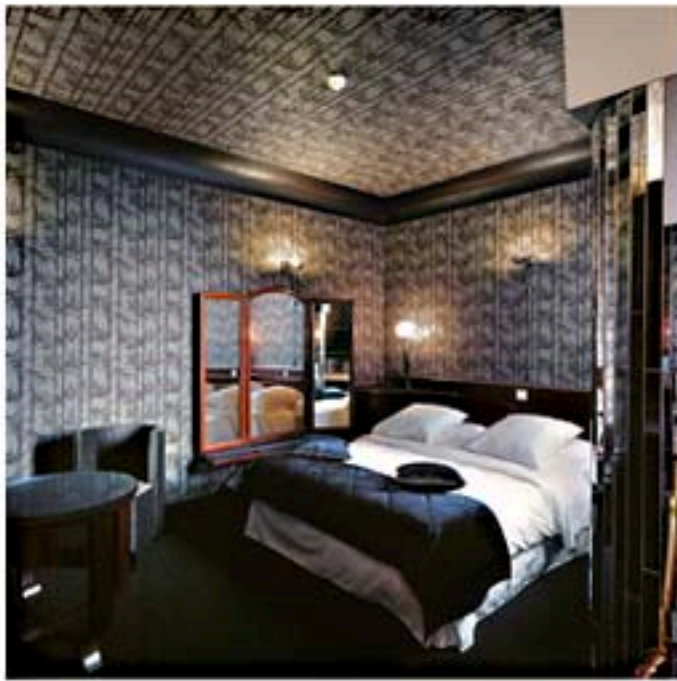
"women of loose morals" and those under 21, but you could bring your best friend's wife with impunity. From separate elevators to an underfloor bell system that allowed staff to hide away when couples passed, everything was dedicated to discretion. "We had all kind of people, but I have a terrible memory for names," Freddy Martens, who ran Le Berger for 40 years before it was sold in 2009, said in a January interview with Belgian daily *Le Soir*. "Artists, singers, industrialists, politicians...love isn't reserved for a certain kind of person."

In its new format, following 18 months of renovation work, the hotel offers rooms overnight, rather than for just three hours at a time, and the redesign has kept many of the original, racy Art Deco features, while incorporating Wi-Fi and other modern electronics.



Marie-Françoise Plissart

One of the rooms before renovation.



Marie-Françoise Plissart

Le Berger's 50 rooms remain faithful to the original Art Deco styling, including wallpapered ceilings.

Mr. André, who heads up a group of seven private shareholders who also own The White Hotel in Brussels and the Château de la Poste in Belgium's Ardennes region, assembled a team for Le Berger that included architect Olivia Gustot and Zurich-based designer **Martina Nievergelt**.

"My job is to combine old things and new ones, to clothe a space. I'm not a classical interior designer," says Ms. **Nievergelt**. "I wanted a different feel in the different rooms—some are dark like cognac, others are lighter, floral and bohemian."

Le Berger's 50 rooms take up five floors, with 10 different types of rooms. Each has been given a woman's name to help guests remember their favorite. Ambre has a dark wood upholstered bedroom that opens onto a bathroom with a diva-esque sunken bath and columns covered in mirrored tiles. Jeanne, in contrast, has a freestanding bath in the hallway and coat hangers covered in pearls.

Around half the furniture was in the hotel when the group bought it, and has been restored, including bed headboards made of painted glass with pictures of Aphrodite and illuminated, dark wood. All the light

fixtures and bathroom fittings are new, though they blend in with the original features, an effect Ms. **Nievergelt** is pleased with. "People think the tiles are old, but they're reproduction," she says.

One aspect that combines both old and new is the wallpaper. All the rooms are freshly decorated in paper dating from the 1930s to the '80s. Lustrous tropical plants, gold stripes and roses—intense, colorful designs cover the walls and ceilings of every room, in keeping with the Art Deco theme. There are even wallpapered boxes in the corner of each room to conceal television sets, which were incorporated into the room design only after heated discussions between Mr. André and Ms. Nievergelt. While Ms. Nievergelt wanted to stay true to the '30s styling and leave TVs out of the rooms, Mr. André insisted they were essential in a modern hotel. They compromised with flat screens and decorative boxes.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Marie-Françoise Plissart

Interior designer Martina Nievergelt

The rooms, which start at around €120 per night, are smaller than in most hotels, partly because of the original design, and also because many had to have bathrooms fitted. They were initially built only with bidets, given the brief stays of most couples.

The ground floor has been restructured to include a restaurant. Nicolas Hamaide from La Cuisine, a local foodie haunt, has created a menu with a strong local flavor,

including many Belgian brasserie favorites. There is an emphasis on daily specials; on a recent Friday, these included monkfish wrapped in pancetta and a generously proportioned goat cheese and pear salad to start. A view into the kitchen and neatly set out blond wood tables are designed, Mr. André says, to contrast with the dark colors used upstairs. To move between the two worlds, guests take a neon-lit elevator entirely covered with mirrors.

"We wanted to do something different, to create a boutique hotel, but not something too expensive," Mr. André says. "We wanted people to feel they're discovering a hidden gem."