

Check in for a very unusual night's stay

Interior designer Sandrine Alouf turns hotels into fantasy worlds, finds **Véronique Lorelle**

The four-star Décllic hotel, which opened in Montmartre in May, is made for the Instagram generation. The interior was designed by Sandrine Alouf, a young photographer of Lebanese and Belgian parentage who has turned decorator. After studying art history, Alouf worked as a curator at the Brussels Fondation pour l'Architecture. "I didn't set out to pay tribute to photography or any particular author - I'd never have been able to choose - but rather to various techniques, from slides to digital," she says. "This way guests play a part in their own decor, maybe snapping themselves with the tablet or camera available in the room, then papering the wall with their pics for the rest of their stay."

There are plenty of surprises for guests, including round beds, 2.4 metres across, requiring specially tailored sheets, acrylic glass cupboards backlit with coloured LEDs, relief walls and carpet, and a dressing table disguised as a desk. "I like the idea of visitors being able to act out a fantasy, imagine themselves walking up the stairs at the Cannes festival, or alternatively sleeping in the open air. So each room is different." You will need to visit them all to complete the "waking journey" thought up by Alouf.

She has even invented a word to define her work, calling herself an "atmosphérist", halfway between stage design and interior decoration. Since arriving in Paris she has revamped 18 hotels, done various artistic installations and designed chairs, carpets and wallpaper. Her dreamlike world is reminiscent of Magritte, one of her key inspirations. Take clouds - also a favourite with the Belgian surrealist. Alouf puts them everywhere: on the ceiling, naturally, but on walls and even in the back of cupboards. They are one of her distinctive touches. It all started in 2006, when she spent a year redecorating the Luxembourg Gardens RER station in Paris, all blue sky and cumulonimbus, "to give the people who work underground and travellers a breath of fresh air".

Shortly afterwards, at the Five Hotel in Paris, she invited lovers "to take off into the clouds", in a bed she had fixed 1.5 metres off the ground, and under a night sky twinkling with stars. "The bed is set into the partition a bit like Ikea shelves," Alouf says with a laugh. She never loses her photographic perspective, striding round Paris with her Leica to capture seemingly banal details, which she finds "poetic and magical", essential to the city's charm. "It's the most beautiful base one could want and an endless source of wonder," she enthuses. She turns her snaps of Parisian paving stones or man-hole covers into rugs and carpet designs, which "bring the city into your home".

Phrases, single words or snaps picked up on her wanderings form the basis of her decors. "I like the mark left by time," she says, with an eye on her oddly faded wallpaper. At the Montmartre Mon Amour hotel she based a room design on a telegram the boxer Marcel Cerdan sent to Edith Piaf.

Alouf's parents were graphic designers and she



Bedtime stories ... clockwise from top: Excelsior Nice; Hotel Décllic; Hôtel Design Secret de Paris; all with interior designs by Sandrine Alouf, below Maranatha; Céline Demoux; Christophe Bielsa



spent much of her childhood in the family studio. Her grandmother was an inspiration too. She was the first woman to take a degree at La Cambre, the famous Brussels school of architecture and visual arts, subsequently specialising in interior decoration.

Alouf moved to Paris in 2000, explaining that "it's complicated to get one's bearings" with all these artists in the family. She is proud of her mixed heritage, which she owes to parents "from opposite extremes". It has helped her, though she admits to being "between two stools, a mixture of hot and cold", a contrast reflected in her new collection of chairs, "the simplicity of the pine structure offset by a colourful wax print fabric".

Some of her stories can seem trivial, but she is determinedly optimistic that she can "get people talking". Take her work at the Excelsior in Nice, where 3,000 Jews were held during the war before being sent to the Drancy detention centre and then to Auschwitz. She has turned the place into a dreamworld, using antique steamer trunks as cupboards and bedsteads.



She has reinvented the notion of being a designer and decorator, making the most of contemporary technology such as photography, digital printing, LED lighting and interactive effects. Her imagination is boundless, making rugs look like photographic film, or creating a champagne cork-shaped washstand and coffee tables that resemble the wire cages around bubbly bottles, or individually bored tiles inlaid with coloured glass. At Le Splendor, a Paris hotel where the dominant theme is magic, she asked artist Henri Clément to make giant holograms that reference the surrealistic films of Georges Méliès with an artillery shell lodged in the eye of the moon or a figure appearing out of nowhere.

"Each time I invent a world, then I move on. I would like to enable improbable encounters, never-ending stories ..." Alouf says, dreaming out loud. Many guests seem to have got the message. The bed "in the clouds" has proved a catalyst for some 40 couples, prompting a marriage proposal.

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