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Boutique Hotelier Hall of Fame

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October 17, 2011

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Reaching such a milestone has made us look back on a decade of travels and we felt it was appropriate to give some recognition to the hoteliers who make it all so fulfilling (and comfortable!). So we've put our collective heads together and named our top 10 movers and shakers of the noughties (plus 3 to watch for the next decade) in i-escape.com's Boutique Hotelier Hall of Fame.

It's been a tough call, with so many talented contenders among the 45 countries (and the many thousands of hotels) we've visited. But the following individuals are those who we feel have had an industry-changing influence on the world of boutique hotels, be it in their flair for design, their understanding of top-notch service or their vision for identifying a gap in the market and filling it in style. We salute you all...

1. **Nigel Chapman** (of **Polurrian Bay Hotel** in Cornwall, and formerly of **Villas Martinhal** in Portugal) has created a massively successful formula of family luxury/chic (Martinhal has been one of our best-selling properties in 2011),



proving that there is a big market for parents who want to holiday in style. Both are larger than the i-escape average, which allows them to offer scalable services like crèche, tennis etc, but they have managed to retain an intimate atmosphere inside (partly due to clever layout at Martinhal). Nigel is CEO of Halcyon Hotels (which owns Martinhal and Polurrian), and he founded Luxury Family Hotels in 1989 (which he sold to Von Essen in 2005) and co-founded Alias Hotels in 2005 (sold in 2006), so has plenty of experience – and sees the current climate as an opportunity to buy high-profile hotels in top locations at knock down prices.



2. **Enrique (“Kike”) Sarasola**, founder of Room Mate Hotels in Spain. The first property was **Mario** in Madrid in 2003, then a dozen more hotels followed 2004-2008, all in Spain, before he moved further afield into NYC in 2008 and Buenos Aires/Mexico City in 2010. All are cheap, chic and central city hotels with low lead prices (they pretty much introduced yield management pricing into the boutique hotel world) whose big idea is to make you feel like you are staying with a cool and well-connected friend (hence all hotels are given names like Emma, Oscar etc). Guests get a welcome letter from this (fictional) friend, there’s a photo of them too, plus hip, knowledgeable staff to continue the feeling. Added to this are dramatic lobbies with cool lighting and music systems – some convert into bars/dance clubs at night – and bold minimalist bedrooms (often with abstract/patterned wallpapers and ambient lighting – they were early adopters of both). Also, they were among the first hotels to offer free Wi-Fi.



3. **Loh Lik Peng (“Mr Loh”)** of **New Majestic Hotel / 1929 / Wanderlust**, Singapore. Mr Loh Started the idea of funky heritage hotels in Asia (1929 opened



in 2003) hip, designer but not expensive rooms with a palpable sense of history, and often in “colourful” areas (when 1929 and New Majestic opened, their neighbours were letting rooms by the hour...) right in the thick of things, not in sanitised expat-friendly suburbs. He used buildings often considered too risky by investors. Every room is different in size and shape – so it is impossible to standardise décor. Mr Loh cleverly commissioned different artists/architects for each hotel floor (or each room) so they outdid each other on the wow factor. For example Wanderlust has a monster room, a tree room, a spaceship room. It’s also a popular place for the local party crowd to hang out. Despite some bedrooms being on the small side they always deliver on the 21st-century boutique hotel icons like iPod dock Nespresso machines and great beds. He was also the brains behind the Town Hall Hotel in London’s Bethnal Green, another “brave” opening in 2010 with vastly differing rooms (from tiny to huge) but all with designer touches. Like all entrepreneurs he takes risks, and even if some take time to deliver, you have to admire him for that.



4. Charles and Edmund Inkin – Felin Fach Griffin & Gurnard’s Head (and The Old Coastguard). It’s been 10 years since Charles Inkin set up his Eatdrinksleep company and we like the modern take on how a traditional inn should feel. Split between Mid Wales and Cornwall, the pubs are a million miles away from the super-lux chains, yet you come out feeling a lot better. Hooray for simple delicious food and comfy beds. With the latest edition of The Old Coastguard in Mousehole priming up this year, the empire expands as fast as a vintage port. But when you trust the offer, some things are worth waiting for.



5. **Robin Hutson** – **Lime Wood**

and **The Pig** (and ex Hotel du Vin / Soho House Group). It figures that Lime Wood, which we often point to as England's best top end country house hotel (sans formality), is chaired by Hutson. As Hotel du



Vin's co-founder and former director of the Soho House Group, he's

got a great sense of timing for what the market wants and a talent for delivering it. His latest venture, called Home Grown Hotels, seeks to deliver reasonably priced country house hotels with an emphasis on simple local food. Its most recent opening (2011) is the 26-bedroom Pig, converted from the former Whitley Ridge Hotel. In the current economic climate, if he doesn't succeed, nobody will.

6. **Kit Kemp** – Firmdale Hotels. The co-owner and designer of Firmdale Hotels, which now has 6 hotels in London and the **Crosby Street Hotel** in New York really pioneered the boutique hotel concept from the mid-1980s. Kit is one half of a husband and wife team whose vision has been implacable: 14 banks turned them down for their first project but today their turnover is £70m.



They've turned a former hospital, a

dental warehouse and multi-storey car parks into some of the worlds very best hotels. No two rooms are ever the same. She manages to blend classical and contemporary styles with colourful patterned fabrics and furnishings that refresh the senses at every turn. Her talent for creating stylish yet comfortable interiors makes you feel sublime yourself. There's no wonder she's won so many awards.

7. **Emmanuel Rengade**,
Pousada Picinguaba (2002)
and **Fazenda Catucaba** (2011)



Brazil. Emmanuel is a pioneer of cool small hotels in Brazil (Picinguaba was perhaps the first small boutique hotel to open in Brazil), with top-notch service and activities. Both take old buildings (rather than larger purpose-built resorts), respect traditional methods and offer simple chic interiors (nothing too snazzy). But the true added value is the staff (most of whom are local, enthusiastic and trained by Rengade in English and hospitality), who can arrange boat trips with local fishermen, music soirees with the local Seu Jorge equivalent, hiking with the brilliantly funny local schoolteacher – the kind of thing you would never get to see if staying in a larger resort.



8. **Nick Jones**, Soho House Group.

He totally redefined private members' clubs / restaurants into great hotels in Europe and the US. From **Babington House** and **Dean Street Townhouse** to **Soho House Berlin**, **New York** and **Miami**, what we love is how good a grip he seems to have on what people want and how to give it to them. Your experience may sometimes be tinged with a rather celebry client base, but quality of service, food and décor delivers with a dependability we can't help but admire. With sky-high occupancy, and staff who show a relaxed yet slick professionalism, we think he's "right on it" and a total benchmark for how a small hotel group should be run.



9. **Bas Hochstenbach** of Asilia Safari Camps, Tanzania/Kenya, is a pioneer in the move away from fixed



lodges to upmarket mobile camps (of which they have 2 in the Serengeti – **Olakira** and **Ubuntu** – plus 4 others elsewhere) so that you don't have to spend hours bumping in a jeep from your hotel to find the wildlife. The camps move with the season, and they have rights to the best spots in northern Tanzania's prime parks. Of course, part of that premise is that the camps are really comfy so that you can happily spend 2-4 nights rather than just the one night traditionally associated with "fly-camping" out of a luxury lodge. This is where they got the formula right: hot-water showers, in-room electricity from a solar-rechargeable battery (plus paraffin lamps along the paths – for atmosphere), a separate dressing area and really comfy beds. They also have 2 fixed camps (**Dunia** and **Sayari**) for those who want a bit more solidity and style – including an infinity pool and free laundry service.



10. **Geoffrey Dobbs**, **Sun House**, **Dutch House** and **Taprobane**, Sri Lanka. This Hong-Kong based businessman is one of the key players in the tourist renaissance of Sri Lanka. He opened the first boutique hotels in Sri Lanka's south west, restoring 2 colonial mansions in Galle: the Sun House and the Dutch House. He also rents out Taprobane, a small jewel of an island just off the coast at nearby Weligama,



which was once owned by American writer Paul Bowles. He has another beach retreat at Tangalla, and more recently has restored **Lunuganga**, the jungle retreat of famous architect Geoffrey Bawa, near Bentota. Apart from introducing beach elephant polo to Sri Lanka, Dobbs was one of the key figures in raising money and awareness for the tsunami relief for Sri Lanka and founded the charity adoptsrilanka.com, still very active today. And he didn't stop there: in 2007 he set up the Galle Literary Festival, which has now become a well recognised annual event.

And the 3 to watch...

1. Adam and Michael Dorrien Smith –

Tresco and Number 38 Clifton. The stunning Scilly island of Tresco, owned by the Dorrien-Smith family, has offered one of the world's most successful time share businesses for many years. As a family business, their stewardship of the cottages and beach-facing **Flying Boat Club** has created a unique island haven: no cars, good service, stunning views and accommodation of the highest no-nonsense-standard. Now 2 of the sons, Adam and Michael, have started a new company "Boutique and Breakfast" with the very reasonably-priced Number 38 Clifton as its launch in Bristol. With the Tresco style in evidence, we think it will be a huge success and may translate to future projects across mainland UK. We hope so.



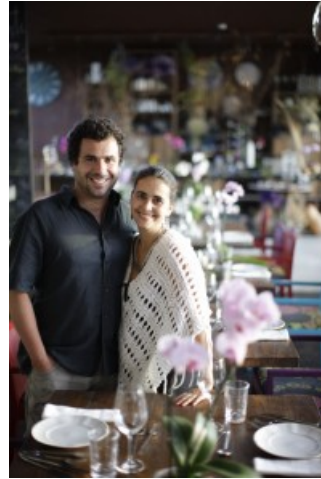
2. **Jo Sinfield** – **Explorers Club**, South Africa. For an intrepid adventurer more used to dodging hippos on the Zambezi or solo-navigating the Irrawaddy through to the Andaman Sea, he might seem an unlikely candidate to nail down an extraordinary collection of rental properties in South Africa. Based in Franschoek where he grew up, together with his business partner Tom Priday, he's struck upon an affordable solution to group stays



in style. His fun sense extends to how well his properties have been styled: lampshades made from recycled coffee sacks, colourful vintage maps of the world sourced from the local university, and milk urns used as bedside tables. It's quirky, unusual, fresh and like nothing we've seen before. He's on the look-out for more projects. More of the same please.

3. **Gonçalo Alves and Marta Fonseca**

(husband and wife) of **Areias do Seixo**, Portugal. They opened their first hotel, Areias do Seixo, in April 2010, and it has been a complete runaway success, one of our top sellers in 2011, pushing the boundaries of eco-luxe and of “getting-under-the-skin” hotel experiences. Just 35 minutes from Lisbon, on a sandy west-coast beach, its upmarket eco design is utterly sensational, proving that green can



be truly, seriously beautiful. Photovoltaic solar panels, composting and energy schemes blend with pod-like woodburners, lavish chaises longues and show-stopping lights – plus there’s an Ayurvedic spa and organic restaurant. Hotel ‘experiences’, some of which are included in the room rate, include: ‘Your hands in the sea’, a fishing/mussel harvesting morning, after which you cook your own lunch; ‘Plot to plate’, a chance for foodies to work alongside the gardener and cook lunch with a chef and ‘Feel Green’, a sustainability workshop during which you plant a tree.

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