The Abu Dhabi Edition is a New Beacon of Style for the City

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Walk into the soaring, light-filled lobby of The Abu Dhabi Edition and the first thing you’ll notice is the seductive fragrance permeating the air. It’s a proprietary blend created expressly for the chain by Parisian perfumers, i.e. Labir and the tones of black tea, bergamot and other undisclosed ingredients will be instantly familiar to anyone who has visited sister properties elsewhere.

The second thing you’ll notice, apart from the eye-catching overhead kinetic sculpture by Amsterdam’s Studio Drift and Lalique Senn’s striking 3D-printed meets Bormio armchairs, is the elegant layout. Somewhere between a gentleman’s club and a living room, the lobby’s sofas, tables and gold leaf billiard table are all there to be used.

And they are. By day, it’s by hordes of locals who lunch, guests coming in from the pool and creative types with only children in tow. At night, though, as the candles are lit and the dreamy lounge music soundtrack gives way to more uptempo beats, a sophisticated club feel sets in. Sit for a while and it will become increasingly difficult to tell if the smartly-dressed individuals circulating between cocktails at the Library Bar, convivial treats at the Oak Room or seafood dishes at Alba, are lingering in the lobby at the start of their evening, or at its end.

But that, you see, is all part of the plan. As a lifestyle hotel, the first of its kind in the region, all of the Edition’s public areas are activated; there to please visually but also to live in their own right, a succession of beautiful, buzzy work and social spaces that collectively create the hotel’s identity.

The effortless elegance with which the Edition pulls it all together is the result of decades of experience. Five years ago, shortly before the second Edition opened in London, I listened to Ian Schrager, the man who invented the boutique hotel when he and former partner Steve Rubell took Studio 54 for a test drive and gave the world Mergans, talk about his dream of opening a mass-market boutique hotel chain called Public, and why he had decided to partner with Marriott to create The Edition. His goal in both cases, he said, was to democratize luxury, to open the boutique experience up to the widest possible audience.

And it is this, rather than the hotel’s glorious appearance – Wimbleden tennis’ perfect palette of calm colours and rich accents, Brett Weston’s beautiful black and white photographs, Le Labir’s skilful bathroom amenities, the thick quilted bathrobes, stand-alone tubs and down, ocean liner sized beds in the simple, stripped-down but chic 294 rooms and 57 serviced residences – that makes the Edition such a classic.

Yes, the shiny balconies do convey the kind of gymnasium vibe that would make Frank Lloyd Wright, not Gehry – smile. Yes, chef Tom Allen has absolutely outdone himself, yielding meat, fish and vegetables with precisely the austerity you might expect from the youngest ever recipient of two Michelin stars. And yes, the marina setting and lush landscaping does lend the urban retreat the feel of an out-of-city escape.

But in a region already awash in lavish places to stay I’ve not seen one that can compete with the marine experience of the Abu Dhabi Edition. The experience is built upon service, which from the moment you arrive is the game you say goodbye is, light-handed and delightful, chatty but efficient, informal but not intrusive, charming but never at the expense of professionalism.

Of course the staff knows your name, that’s old hat. Naturally, they track your preferences so better tailor future stays, but that’s standard. What sets the Edition apart is the very every encounter becomes a conversation. Just as the lobby blurs the line between hotel and living room, so the service blurs the line between hotel and home stay. I won’t claim that you’ll come away having made friends, but you will leave with a definite sense of characters, for if you’re inclined to listen, each and every member of staff has a story to tell.

In the world of contemporary hospitality, bouchon restaurants but it is very hard to get right. Too little and it comes across as insincere. Too much, and it can blur the line between service and served and speaking as one who has experienced both (in both its terrestrial and aerial forms), I can confirm that ‘storytelling’ might be the buzz when you’re in Abu Dhabi but it grates on anyone who has actually paid their own way.

The Edition walks right up to that line, but does not cross it. Informal, but measured. Classy, but never oppressive (or worse, patronising). The result is an experience that is warm, welcoming and human. Relaxed, the staff appear to say, settle in and kick off your shoes and whatever you want, whenever you want it, we are here for you.