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Helvetia & Bristol, Florence: the discovery of Capitoline Baths of the Roman Florentia

The renovation of the hotel led to the addition of a new wing with rooms and suites designed by Anouska Hempel and a SPA located in the former Roman baths

Historic five-star hotel Helvetia & Bristol reopens in Florence

Located in the heart of Florence, within the walls of a historic residence, Helvetia & Bristol is a five-star hotel, which belongs to the Florentine chain of luxury hotels Starhotels, today counting thirty facilities between Italy, Paris, London and New York. Inaugurated in 1885 as the first luxury hotel in the city, the Helvetia & Bristol has recently reopened after a renovation process, which expanded the building and restored its historic wing.

Grand Tour Collection – Helvetia & Bristol Firenze

To tell the Helvetia & Bristol Hotel's history and explain its renovation Starhotels created a book entitled *Grand Tour Collection – Helvetia & Bristol Firenze*, published in limited run by Gruppo Editoriale and now on sale in the hotel. The book, written in both English and Italian, derives its name from the Seventeenth to early Nineteenth century custom of a trip through Europe, with Italy as a key destination, undertaken by upper-class young European men, as explained by Elisabetta Fabri, President and CEO of Starhotels, whose contribution opens the volume.

«Florence is also my home city, as well as where Starhotels is headquartered, so how could I not feel the urge, combined with a strong sense of responsibility, to give new life to a hotel so rich in history. Experiencing a place that has welcomed and inspired travelers from all over the world for centuries is what this book is all about, the glorious beauty of Florence and Italy. The Grand Tour celebrated the inestimable riches of this country for hundreds of years and the Helvetia & Bristol was an important part of the journey».

Helvetia & Bristol hotel: antique meets contemporary

The Helvetia & Bristol hotel was founded in 1883 by Swiss entrepreneur Gregorio Mosca and then passed through several families of hoteliers, until it was acquired by Starhotels in 2016. Mr. Mosca chose to locate his hotel in the historic center of Florence, just a few steps from the tourist attractions of the city, such as Palazzo Strozzi, via Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella and Santa Maria del Fiore.

The renovation promoted by Starhotels aimed on the one hand at restoring and enhancing the hotel's ancient history, while on the other hand renewing it with a contemporary appeal.

The Helvetia wing in collaboration with Antico Setificio Fiorentino

The Helvetia wing, which includes sixty-four rooms, witnessed a recovery of its historic furnishings and tapestry, carried on in collaboration with Antico Setificio Fiorentino, a local workshop that weaves custom designs and produces silk brocade, damask and taffeta woven fabrics for interior decoration.

The Bristol wing: Banco di Roma

The hotel has also been expanded with the addition of the Bristol wing, made possible by the acquisition of the former headquarters of the Banco di Roma. This led to the discovery, in the former bank vault, of the remains of the Capitoline Baths of the Roman Florentia, thanks to archaeological surveys made in cooperation with the Soprintendenza Archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per la Città metropolitana di Firenze e per le Province di Pistoia e Prato.

Now the ancient location of the Roman Thermal Baths, dating back to the first century AD, hosts the hotel's SPA, where sections of the Roman walls have been left visible in memory of the city's past.

Anouska Hempel: New Zealand-born interior designer

In the Bristol wing guests will also find twenty-five new rooms and suites signed by New Zealand-born film and television actress turned hotelier and interior designer Anouska Hempel, best known for her utopian vision and creative style: *«Choosing top designer Anouska Hempel to style the twenty-five rooms and suites in the new Bristol wing came from my wish to create an original and inspiring hotel, to be experienced like a second home. Together we have rewritten the history of this iconic place of hospitality, giving back to Florence one of its most refined residences. This hotel now conveys the city's authentic essence and sense of place, creating a close connection with the location».*

For Hempel – who is considered to be the inventor of the concept of boutique hotel – this was the first time working in Italy. The interiors of the hotel have also been enriched with unpublished works made on original design by Florentine craftsmen, in order to highlight the Italianness of the hotel while at the same time supporting local artisans – a tribute to Italian hospitality and savoir-faire.

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The hotel offers eighty-nine rooms and suites divided into different types of accommodation. The Presidential Suite Bristol is composed of twobedrooms, a sitting room and three bathrooms. The bedrooms feature four-poster beds in antique-finish mirror paneling or wrought iron, with fabrics and curtains in Italian silk. The sitting room is provided with velvet sofas, marble finishes and a fireplace. All the bathrooms are tiled in white Carrara marble, with the master one featuring a Turkish bath. The lighting consists of bronze lamps hand-crafted by Bronzetto.

Panoramic Suite Helvetia

Located on the fifth floor, the Panoramic Suite Helvetia offers a view over the Cathedral, the Bell Tower by Giotto and Palazzo Strozzi. Equipped with two bathrooms in Italian marble, it combines antiques, design objects and paintings made by renowned artists with a range of modern technologies.

Devon&Devon bathtubs, Carrara monoliths mirrors

The Suites and the Junior Suites Helvetia & Bristol come in different styles, sizes and configurations, alternating restored antique furnishings with contemporary elements. They all display materials typical of the Florentine tradition, such as velvet, silk, taffeta and marble, as well as artworks and design objects signed by Italian artisans: prints by Alinari illustrating Florence in the mid-Nineteenth century, scagliola tables by Bianco Bianchi, lamps hand-crafted in brass and fabric on an original drawing, Devon&Devon bathtubs, Carrara monoliths mirrors.

Overlooking Palazzo Strozzi and the city's shopping streets is the Junior Suites View Helvetia, inspired by the historical Florentine noble residence. It includes a sitting room with velvet sofas, a bedroom – which in some cases also features a canopy and a walk-in closet – and a bathroom in two-tone marble. All the furniture is antique, including Italian fabrics and mirrors lined with wood paneling.

The Deluxe Helvetia & Bristol are characterized by hand-beveled Italian oak floors and marble bathrooms. The bedrooms are embedded with Italian fabrics and boast handicrafts that become iconic of the Italian taste, such as Murano-glass chandeliers.

Finally, the hotel also provides a solution specifically designed for guests traveling with children: the Family Room, which offers special gadgets and services for the little ones.

The Tuscan fauna as in the Eighteenth-century chinoiserie

The Helvetia & Bristol Hotel offers various dining solutions, all linked by the same mission: celebrating Italian cuisine and rewarding food and wine research by using raw materials of the territory and partnering with local producers.

The breakfast is served every morning in the hotel's Tinello and is personally chosen by Italian pastry chef and gastronome Iginio Massari together with his children, Debora and Nicola. The Tinello, designed by Riccardo Barthel, is linked to the Winter Garden, a space still covered with its original Liberty-style glass ceiling, embedded with petroleum blue velvet seats and wallpapers depicting the Tuscan fauna as in the Eighteenth-century chinoiserie. The Tinello can also be booked for private events.

Open from morning to night, also for non-guests of the hotel, is the Cibrè Caffè, where people can enjoy breakfast, lunch, aperitif, dinner or just a coffee break, choosing between a variable range of proposals inspired to the local culinary traditions and made with seasonal and organic products. Cibrè is a catering brand with over forty years of history in Florence and, following The Helvetia & Bristol's renovation, it has doubled its presence within the hotel. Indeed, the new wing has become home to the Cibrè Ristorante & Cocktail Bar, a location designed by Massimo Adario, where contemporary reinterpretations of traditional Italian specialties are offered along with a selection of signature cocktails and international classics, served on a marble counter.

The spa: the Roman Thermal Baths

The already mentioned SPA of the hotel was inspired by the ancient Roman Thermal Baths that were once located in its place, whose rituals were based on alternating hot with cold to purify and tone the body, and on socialization. The starting point of the SPA path is Lacus Quietis, where guests are called to immerse in thermal water. Then, they proceed into Calidarium, the hot steam; Sudatorium, the sauna; and Frigidarium, the cold pool. After a warm break surrounded by the silence of the Tepidarium, it is the turn of Aequae, a path of water jets. The last step is Area Quietis, a relaxation room where to restore mental and physical balance.

The SPA also offers a range of face, body and beauty treatments, as well as massages and the possibility to take part in wellness and fitness activities both inside and outside of the hotel.

For its SPA treatments The Helvetia & Bristol Hotel partners with Cinq Mondes, French brand of holistic products made with medicinal plants from the five regions of the world its name evokes – Indonesia, China, Japan, India and Morocco – combined with modern scientific know-how.

The Helvetia & Bristol Firenze

Via dei Pescioni 2, Florence – is a five-star hotel, belonging to the luxury hotels chain Starhotels, which has been recently renovated and now features eighty-nine rooms and suites, two restaurants, a SPA, a gym and an event space.

Debora Vitulano

The writer does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article.

IMAGE GALLERY

Grand Hotel et Des Palmes, Palermo. A Sicilian story, with English roots

Two years of renovation bears the signature of Giuseppe Corvaia – Grand Hotel et Des Palmes gives back to the city, recovering Ernesto Basile's Art Nouveau interventions but stepping into the contemporary



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The 10th anniversary of Investec Cape Town Art Fair – Dr. Mariella Franzoni and Natasha Becker

The 2023 Tomorrows/Today section is titled 'In and Out of Time' and represents an homage to the African American poet Maya Angelou's poem about everlasting love and suffering

Septieme Gallery, Paris: Julie Banâtre and Léa Perier Loko, the second location in Benin

Situated in the Rue de l'Université of the 7th Arrondissement area, the building was built in the Haussmannien style – the gallery is an amalgamation of tradition and modernity

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