

# Special editions

Boutique hotel pioneer Ian Schrager's unlikely alliance with corporate giant Marriott hasn't compromised his design creativity but there is a new emphasis on service

Story **Sharon Krum** Photography **Mike McGregor**

**T**he envy-inducing travel stories you hear at a dinner party are rarely the ones about the great trattoria someone stumbled upon in Venice or the tailor they found in Hong Kong who once made a suit for a rock star. Most likely you've heard similar versions before. What will impress is when someone proffers a description of the time they stayed at one of Ian Schrager's hotels, either in New York, Miami, London, Los Angeles or San Francisco.

They'll boast how the front door had no sign (you had to be in the know, which they were, of course), the hallways were dark as night, the chairs had three legs, paintings were hung on ceilings and a chess set was the size of a small child. They'll mention all the stylish people they saw while staying there – Anna Wintour and the fashion pack dining at the Royalton; celebrities checking in at the Paramount. The whole experience, they will conclude, made them feel like extras in a movie, maybe *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Devil Wears Prada*. At the same time, mind you, they will complain that the service was lousy and the rooms were tiny. You would smile approvingly, then think about stabbing them with your knife.

For 20 years this was Ian Schrager's modus operandi, getting you to check into the Royalton, Paramount, Hudson (New York), Delano (Miami), St Martin's Lane, Sanderson (London) Mondrian (Los Angeles) and Clift (San Francisco) for an experience that was part holiday and all theatre. His hotels were about arresting visuals, staff who could double for models, hip factor, and imparting an "emotional experience". Service? Not exactly the reason people came.

"The Royalton and Paramount, didn't have great service," Schrager admits now. "Not that it wasn't important to me but it wasn't what I was going to market with. I was really making an impact based on something

cool and innovative." Schrager breaks into a masterful grin. "Can you imagine I am now involved in a hotel that has great service?" he asks, talking about his latest venture, the "luxury lifestyle" Edition chain of boutique hotels, a partnership with corporate giant Marriott. "People today are more sophisticated, they have evolved in terms of style and taste. They want a heightened experience ... and great service. I don't think people are willing to sacrifice that to stay in the coolest place in town any more."

While Schrager, 64, might enjoy his new reputation as Mr Service, that's not what has the hotel world and his particular customer talking. Rather, they're chattering about his shift from fantasy to reality when it comes to hospitality, from over-design to "anti-design" when it comes to aesthetics. The Edition hotels will be a 180° turn from his earlier eye-candy efforts, all at his insistence.

"I definitely think there's a new normal now because of the economy but since I was doing nightclubs my idea always was, let's do something really special. But it can't be design on steroids because everyone is doing it, and it can't be based on irony because it might seem contrived. Now I am interested in something more fundamental, and it's harder to do something simple, because it means it keeps getting more and more distilled. So, no more three-legged chairs. Everything has to function ... people won't tolerate it if [a hotel] doesn't work any more. If you ask me what the important thing about Edition is, I wouldn't say design, I would say service. Friendly, personal, but no less attentive. I think now people don't care if the room service waiter has gold buttons and white gloves. I think they want coffee served hot, fast, and need to know when it will be coming."

The other thing he's focused on is technology. At work, if a web page doesn't load fast enough, we move on. And if a hotel has 700-thread count linens but no Wi-Fi, we move out. "The definition of luxury today is different."

Schrager – father of a baby son plus two teenage daughters from a prior marriage – grew up in Brooklyn,

and you can hear it in his accent, which is thick, like good hot-dog mustard. His early hotels, (part of the Morgans Hotel Group, which he sold in 2005) weren't actually the beginning of his life as a purveyor of the cool experience, but an extension of it. Schrager first came to prominence when he and best friend Steve Rubell upended nightlife in New York in 1977 with the opening of their disco, Studio 54. It was a nightly party of music, celebrity, sex, drugs and the velvet rope. Seriously, New Yorkers who weren't even born then not only know of Studio 54, they mourn they never had a chance to go.

His career as a hotelier began after he and Rubell did a 13-month stint in prison for tax evasion, stemming from an IRS raid on Studio 54. While serving time they decided to go into the hotel business but style would be the hook, not sameness. "Holiday Inn used to have an ad, the best surprise is no surprise. I couldn't disagree more. Nothing is better than a good surprise. That's a mass-market, 1950s concept, not product distinction."

In 1984 they renovated and re-opened Morgans hotel on Madison Avenue, with designer Andree Putman providing chic, minimal interiors. The Royalton followed in 1987, an instant hit with the fashion/publishing/magazine crowd who "got" the wit of the Philippe Starck sculptural furnishings and a lobby that doubled as a catwalk. After Rubell died from hepatitis in 1989, Schrager continued on his own. "When I started, hotels were based on the most efficient execution possible or on providing great service, and there wasn't anybody doing anything innovative, and my generation was left out," he says of his motivation. "I thought, I choose cars that reflect my culture, clothes, music, where are my hotels?" He kept adding to his portfolio, with Starck providing the whimsical, cinematic interior design. Schrager was lauded as the creator of the boutique hotel movement, while around him copycat hotels sprang (and continue to spring) up.

"I was not flattered," he says, pursing his lips.



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- 01 Broken surfboards form a dramatic lobby installation in the Edition, Waikiki.
- 02 Gaze into infinity from the terrace on the daybed of your choice.
- 03 One of the 353 bedrooms.
- 04 Schrager wanted the Edition, Waikiki to "be like his apartment".
- 05 The interiors were designed by Yabu Pushelberg.
- 06 The hotel's Sunrise Pool.
- 07 Natural tones are used throughout public areas as well as the guestrooms.
- 08 At night, the Private Sunset Beach becomes a candle and lantern-lit hub.
- 09 Schrager thinks hotels should reflect the essence of the locale and wanted a "plantation feel" for the Edition, Waikiki.



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***"I think it's incredibly important that a hotel has the essence, the ethos of a city"***

"They're my kids, they're my ideas and you should come up with your own. I don't get aggravated any more, I used to." Probably because he now views them as "just a replication of what I did and, since they are not a result of a vision, they ultimately will atrophy. I realise in a capitalist world you can only hope to be first and best. So for me it means keep moving."

The industry suffered post 9/11 and in 2003 Schrager filed for bankruptcy protection for the Clift in San Francisco. After selling his Morgans Hotel Group, he launched the Ian Schrager Company and today he

creates his own residential properties and hotels – he renovated but later sold his stake in New York's Gramercy Park Hotel and is now renovating the Ambassador East in Chicago – and works on branded hotels.

He had thought for a good while about creating a chain like Edition and knew he needed to partner with a major player. "I went to Marriott," he says. "I was interested in doing something that had great scale. I think the amount of ideas I have contributed to the industry wasn't commensurate with the amount of hotels I had done."

Simultaneously, Marriott were looking at getting into

the boutique hotel business, and who knows that terrain better than Schrager? His deal with Edition places him as creative advisor for design, marketing and branding, while Marriott operates the hotels and a third-party developer owns them. Each hotel "will be original, if everybody listens to what I say", he laughs. "I'm there to give them a concept, direction. Sometimes they follow it and sometimes they don't," he adds, speaking of the compromises one makes working with a corporate partner. "When I worked with Philippe Starck, I would get plans on toilet paper ... we can't do that with Marriott."

Last October the first Edition opened in Waikiki; the Istanbul Edition opened its doors earlier this year. The plan is to roll out up to 100 Editions in the next decade, with planned locations including Miami, London, Mexico City and Barcelona. And Australia? "I love Sydney," says Schrager. "Great people, great nightclubs and restaurants, and I think once the hotels come to Asia, [Sydney or Melbourne] will be on the list. You can't have a worldwide brand and not have a hotel in Australia."

Or, he says, a hotel anywhere that is just a box of rooms. He tells a story that 35 years ago he and Rubell were in Paris and Rubell wanted to eat at McDonald's.

Schrager balked. "I didn't come to Paris to eat at McDonald's and, for the same reason, I am not going to Paris to stay at an American hotel. I want to feel like I am in Paris. I think it's incredibly important that a hotel has the essence, the ethos of a city, but not the clichés. The job of a hotel is to give a sense of place. So in Hawaii, to me that means the idea of a plantation, of Diamond Head [the volcanic crater], the ocean. Yes, we have a ukulele in the room because it's a bit of irreverence ... and there is a great surfboard installation [in the lobby] but when I walk in there it feels like I am walking into a plantation in Hawaii." The Edition in Waikiki has 353 rooms in natural tones, a lobby featuring a bookcase that slides open in the late afternoon to reveal a bar and exteriors that include native plant gardens and a private lagoon. In a return to his roots – and a first for Schrager inside a hotel – there is a nightclub called the Crazybox.

The interiors were designed by Yabu Pushelberg (also tapped for Miami Edition) and co-owner Glenn Pushelberg praises Schrager for always "tapping into the zeitgeist" while describing him as "brilliantly insane. He's intense, you really have to hold your own with Ian, but the hotel is a reflection of him and I like that," he says. "He told us he wanted Edition to be like his apartment,

which was designed by John Pawson and Christian Liaigre, very elegant and serene. Our idea was that people would breathe out when they got their rooms, that the staff is helpful and happy. I think those feelings about a place are more important than 'look at that oversize chair'. Everyone has grown up, nobody wants to live in a toy store any more." In the just-opened Istanbul Edition, Schrager says his concept was to create a feeling of a jewel box, with wood ceilings and floors and inlaid mosaics. "Ottoman references. They're not literal but you know you are in Istanbul." So how does he distil his vision of a city in a hotel? He visits to soak up the ambience, researching the art, architecture and culture. "When I go to a city people say to me, 'What can you do that is not already here?' And I say, 'Well, you can say that about a book or a movie too.' It's about creating something that resonates with people."

After the doors open, Schrager monitors travel blogs to see how travellers respond to his ideas, which, by the way, he never seems to lack. "The hotel business never tires for me. It cuts across so many creative disciplines – interior design, film, fashion, architecture. It's not just about putting a bed in a room. I love it because I feel I still have something to say."