

KEY NOTES

GRAND HOTEL CENTRAL, BARCELONA

What's the buzz? When it was constructed a century ago, the building that now houses the Grand Hotel Central set several records. It was Barcelona's tallest. It was the first structure on Via Laetania, the stately artery connecting the medieval old town with what became known as New Barcelona. And it was the city's only building with a lift.

Hardly the sexiest claim to fame, that last one — but what it enabled certainly was: a penthouse residence for the polymath politician who commissioned the building, Francesc Cambó. Today, this apartment in the clouds, with a landscaped, 1,000-sq-metre garden perfumed by orange trees, jasmine and bougainvillea, may well be Barcelona's most covetable spot.

Opening this up to guests is just one hallmark of a €14mn refurbishment and relaunch under new owners that has transformed a staid, increasingly fatigued landmark into a cultured and colourful five-star hotel, which — in the mould of dynamic general manager María Contreras Palmada — has rediscovered a sense of fun.

Location, location, location: No false advertising here: the “Central” of the name is entirely merited. Turn left out of an entrance framed by Ionic columns, and you drop straight into the maze of the El Born barrio with its craft shops, indie boutiques and cocktail bars. Cross the street and the Gothic quarter opens up before you, fanning out from the 13th-century cathedral with labyrinthine abandon. The port and, beyond it, the beach and palm-lined boardwalk of Playa de la Barceloneta, is a 10-minute stroll down Via Laetania.

And all this without the usual central-location trade-off: shattered peace. Built in the Noucentisme style (think Modernism without glass mosaics and frilly bits), the hotel building is a thick-walled, soundproofed sanctuary into which you can retreat when the frenzy of the Catalan capital gets too much.

Checking in: “A bit . . . dark” was how one long-serving staff member summed up Grand Central's previous incarnation (the building first became a hotel in 2005). Letting in the light was clearly top priority for London-based design studio Sagrada in the four-month revamp, during which the hotel shut completely rather than endure a piecemeal, endlessly protracted ordeal. Like an irksomely sun-tanned colleague back from a sabbatical, the place is now relentlessly jolly, with thoughtful flashes of colour and bold artwork enlivening the stylishly muted creams

and slate greys of the communal areas.

A total of 147 rooms and suites are arranged across seven floors of what were once, in the Cambó days, offices. Each room is individually decorated, while all share the aesthetic of the Noucentisme movement — order, symmetry and harmony. Hence, neatly vertical parallel lines in the pale-wood walls, made-to-measure furniture and lavish tactile headboards; subtle, warm lighting emanating from discreet corners; flower-shaped rosettes and elegant curves in the cornicing overhead.

In my room — a “Deluxe Corner” on the third floor whose soft-pink tones glowed serenely as the sunlight tracked around it — a rose-pink chaise longue stretched out decadently beneath the

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Roof with a view: the eighth-floor terrace looks over central Barcelona

window. The designers seem to have resisted the usual temptation to over-complicate the technology. I struggled to find a single switch (lights; temperature control; full-room blackout) that wasn't entirely intuitive.

What to do: I wouldn't normally advocate holing up in your hotel, particularly not in a city as invigorating as Barcelona, but the rooftop pool and sundeck, the Terraza del Central, could happily account for at least half a day. A decade ago, I sneaked up here for a furtive dip with a friend staying in the hotel. I remember a wondrous spot, puzzlingly unloved.

That's certainly not the case now: lemon and sky-blue cushions enliven the elegant cream daybeds arranged around an infinity pool that seems to levitate above the chaotic roofscape of El Born. Float on your back and you can admire those orange trees spilling over the wall from the Cambó sky garden, which occupies the other, slightly higher, part of the roof.

Set back from the pool is a large gazebo with tables at which to sip a negroni or caipirinha, linger over lunch or enjoy the mellow — and occasionally rousing — beats of homegrown DJs playing their sundowner sets. “We definitely want guests to move a shoulder or two,” Palmada tells me.

With delightful incongruity, the floor is also home to a wood-panelled library straight out of the tense denouement of

an Agatha Christie novel. “Bibliophile” was one of the many descriptors on Cambó's congested business card, and here he translated more than 400 Greek and Latin texts into Catalan as part of his efforts to promote the language and culture. Guests can ensconce themselves here or enjoy guided tours of his residence above — though it would be a shame if that garden, with its high stone arches and ornamental ponds, isn't used as some sort of romantic dining or sundowner spot.

What about the food? Ground-floor restaurant Can Bo won't open until September 1, promising innovative, seasonal tapas and *plattillos* (“little plates”) along with a wine cellar big on unheralded Catalan vintages.

Until then, La Terraza serves light bites and sharing dishes, such as hand-cut Iberian Bellota ham, grilled sea-bass and Andalusian-style calamari. All with a side order of splendid rooftop views.

The damage: Double rooms from €450. A published author? Bring a copy of your book to place in the library and you'll receive a 30 per cent discount.

Elevator pitch: A Bentley with a funky playlist.

Duncan Craig

Duncan Craig was a guest of Grand Hotel Central (grandhotelcentral.com).
More on Barcelona: barcelonaturisme.com