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Room Service: Letters to write home about

JK Place Roma, Italy

BEN ROSS | SATURDAY 12 OCTOBER 2013

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Why JK Place? I'd been told that owner Ori Kafri named these boutique hotels after his father, Jonathan, a big name in Italian textiles. However, perched on the edge of a beautifully upholstered grey armchair, carefully sipping coffee from a tiny cup, he laughs when I applaud his filial efforts. "Well, I liked the sound of the initials," he says. "But if I'd used my own, it would have been a very different sort of brand."

Good point. The hotel we're sitting in is far from being just an OK place to be. It's a statement of intent for Kafri, the latest stage in his drive to create an international collection. The first JK Place opened in Florence 10 years ago, followed by an outpost in Capri. Both have been showered with design and hospitality plaudits. But Rome is the big leap. "Once you are here, it's a showroom to the world," he says.

It's not about size. JK Place Florence has only 20 rooms, Capri just 22, and even this Roman version has a mere 30 to choose from. Instead, it's about a certain sensibility, one which starts at the hidden-away front door. As Kafri says, "To ring a bell to get into a hotel, you need self-confidence, to have a personality."

That might seem a little daunting, but in fact all the showing off is tempered by real charm. Upon arrival I was ushered straight into the sumptuous library. This in turn leads to a restaurant bedecked with red leather chairs, bright green silks on the walls and sleek, spiky chandeliers. As I eyed up the contemporary art, big books begged for attention: Helmut Newton, a James Bond retrospective, a celebration of DC Comics. This is a place of escapism they seem to say. Shut the door behind you and feast your eyes.

Location

Kafri had been searching for more than six years before he fetched upon this, the former architecture school of the University of Rome. It's a stately building at the city's heart, tucked behind Via Tomacelli, next to a small market square.

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Of course, JK woz 'ere long before boutique hotels were big business. John Keats still works his tragic magic over this part of Rome. The rooms – now the Keats-Shelley House – where he spent the last weeks of his life overlook the Spanish Steps, just five minutes' walk away. You reach them by passing the more temporal delights of Via Condotti, the city's premier shopping street, where Gucci is literally opposite Prada, and every other luxury brand you can think of glints and gleams. I suspect the great Romantic poet might not have approved.

Comfort

If John Keats felt his name was "writ in water", JK Place engraves its own in polished brass. When I arrived last weekend, a hotel due to be completed during the summer had been open scarcely seven days, a casualty of Italian bureaucracy. General manager Samuel Porreca was still wringing his hands at the six-month process it took to mount a name-plate next to the front door. Nevertheless, there it now shines – and aside from a couple of teething problems with a recalcitrant elevator and some late excitements with the plumbing, everything beyond it seemed pin-sharp to my eyes.

Michele Bönan, the designer of all three JK Places, clearly didn't quite agree. He was busy straightening and adjusting before the arrival of a photographer from Architectural Digest. Suave, grey-haired, utterly Italian, he waved distractedly when I asked what inspired him. Tom Ford's A Single Man was a touchstone, apparently, along with Classical Rome. Certainly, historic busts lurk in the white-walled lounge, but it's a bit more glamorous than that: La Dolce Vita, rather than I Claudius.

The rooms themselves aren't huge, but are quiet and graceful. An elegant four-poster dominated mine, contrasting with the greys of the walls and the dark rosewood closet space. And there's enough Carrera marble and shiny chrome in the bathrooms to remind you that you're in Italy, even if the view was disappointing: a tiny internal courtyard. Soft drinks from the minibar, coffee and Wi-Fi are included in the room rate, part of a treat-the-place-as-your-home philosophy appropriate to hotel's relatively small scale.

The restaurant's menu hadn't been finalised on my visit, so instead I was launched at a spectacular chef's-choice feast that ran the gamut from skewers of octopus and potato, to spaghetti with courgette and clams, to croutons dressed in salty olive foam.

A roof-garden-cum-bar is also planned. Kafri took me up to check out the scene from four storeys up. The hotch-potch of Rome old and new – church domes rising beside modern residential buildings – seemed an appropriate counterpoint to the design notes within. At night, JK Place's glittering clientele will feel perfectly at home out here, under the stars.

Travel Essentials

JK Place Roma

Via Di Monte D'Oro, Rome, Italy (00 39 06 98 26 34; jkroma.com)

Rooms ****

Value ****

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Doubles from €600 including breakfast.



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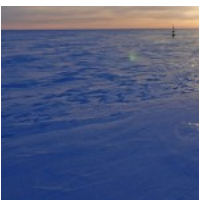
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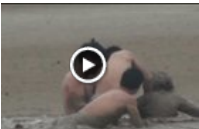
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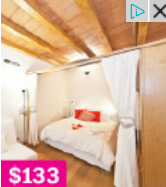
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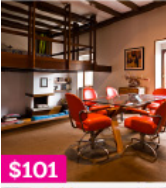
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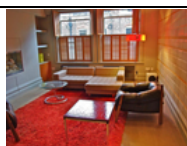
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