



Boutique

OFFERS SOMETHING UNIQUE

The Hotel Britomart, Auckland.
Photo credit: Sam Hartnett

WITH THE FLEXIBILITY TO DO THINGS THEIR WAY, SMALLER AND MORE INTIMATE BOUTIQUE HOTELS HAVE CARVED OUT A NICHE IN THE ACCOMMODATION MARKET.

THE “SUPPORT LOCAL” MESSAGE THAT garnered momentum during pandemic-themed 2020, has had a positive spin-off for New Zealand’s boutique hotel sector.

Kiwis, who would otherwise spend generously on overseas travel, have channelled their holiday budgets into having experiences and short breaks in their own country – even their own cities – and for many, there’s been an element of rewarding themselves for a tough year.

The treat factor of staying somewhere unique, where the small touches are homely and you’re more than a room number, has meant that boutique hotels have found a new following from

guests that might ordinarily opt for other accommodation options.

The generally more-personalised and bespoke boutique sector of the accommodation market thrives on the freedoms that come from being independent of major brands, and the restrictions such alignments can entail.

Boutique operations are at liberty to source and secure products and furnishings that work for the specific market they are operating in, without being constrained by supply agreements or an often clinical corporate “look and feel”.

Bayleys’ *Hotels, Tourism and Leisure* checked in with some of the country’s

boutique establishments to see how business has been in this tumultuous past year – the highs and the lows.

THE HOTEL BRITOMART

Six months ago, The Hotel Britomart opened its doors in Auckland’s Britomart Precinct near the CBD’s waterfront.

The 10-floor new building designed by Cheshire Architects adjoins the restored Masonic and Buckland heritage buildings and is owned by Cooper and Company, the development and ownership entity behind the broader Britomart Precinct itself.

The hotel offers 99 rooms within the new building, along with three super-

luxurious The Landing Suites on its top floor, and two further The Landing Suites in the heritage Buckland building.

The Landing Suites are a nod to the luxury Bay of Islands destination called The Landing, also owned by Cooper and Company.

Having opened when the whole country was at alert level two, followed by two further Auckland region lockdowns and with most international borders still closed, general manager Clinton Farley said the premium boutique hotel’s many points of difference elevates it in the city’s accommodation market.

“The Hotel Britomart was designed and built by New Zealanders, is owned and managed by Kiwis, and finely blends heritage with sustainability and a modern edge.

“It’s the country’s only 5-Green Star hotel making it a true market leader in the sustainable and regenerative travel space.



The Rangihoua Suite terrace, The Hotel Britomart. Photo credit: Sam Hartnett

“PEOPLE HAVE BEEN VERY DISCERNING ABOUT WHERE THEY SPEND THEIR MONEY, SEEKING AN EXPERIENCE THAT CONNECTS THEM, IS DIFFERENT AND SPECIAL – THE HOTEL BRITOMART OFFERS THIS.”

CLINTON FARLEY, GENERAL MANAGER,
THE HOTEL BRITOMART, AUCKLAND

“With international travel restricted for over a year now, people have been very discerning about where they spend their money, seeking an experience that connects them, is different and special – The Hotel Britomart offers this.”

From the use of natural timbers in each room, Studio Red organic teas and luxurious organic hair and skincare products from Sansceuticals – both Auckland-based companies – to the carefully-curated collections of New Zealand books, original ceramics and artworks, this is thoughtful hospitality at its finest.

“Those that would typically travel and holiday in Europe or elsewhere overseas in pre-pandemic times, are seeking ways to reward or treat themselves and are comfortable with spending more than they perhaps usually would in New Zealand.”

The understated finer details and luxuries that are standard at The Hotel Britomart make it an aspirational destination and, thanks to those closed borders, it is Kiwis – and now Aussies – that are getting to experience its world-class service and amenity.

Farley said a key market for The Hotel Britomart is Aucklanders wanting to stay in the heart of downtown – to have a city escape or celebrate an important milestone.

“Britomart Precinct has 65 premier retailers including boutique fashion houses, luxury international brands and eclectic dining and hospitality options, so some of our guests just stay within the precinct when they book in with us.

“Everything is accessible, they’re spoiled for choice and they feel they’ve had a real break.

“Our in-house restaurant *kingi* has also resonated with guests – as well as the general dining public – and it rounds out the hotel offering nicely while supporting sustainable fisheries and locally-sourced produce.”

Farley said he’s proud of the way The Hotel Britomart forged ahead with its opening, and how it has supported local businesses through uncertain times.

“It has been a case of simply getting on with business and as a unique hotel as part of TFE Hotels Collection, we’ve been able to tune into what domestic travellers want to deliver an exceptional experience.”

Farley said Auckland city has lacked activity and any significant events in the last 12 months – other than the America’s Cup, which he says was over too quickly – and the sooner the pace picks up, the better.

“We have an ‘always on’ public relations strategy and have been proactively marketing into Australia. With the creation of the trans-Tasman bubble we are looking forward to welcoming our Australian friends, family, business and leisure travellers back to Auckland.”



The Country Hotel, Napier.

NAPIER LANDMARK

Voted in the top one percent of hotels in the Tripadvisor Travellers’ Choice Best of the Best category, the 18-guest room County Hotel in Napier, Hawke’s Bay, has been owned by Angela and Chris Barons since 2002.

The impressive building is the only remaining example of Victorian-Edwardian classical style architecture in Napier, surviving the 1931 earthquake that changed the face of the city. Under the couple’s guardianship, the hotel gained one of the first Qualmark 5-star ratings for a boutique lodging facility in New Zealand.

Angela Barons said in 2020, after experiencing shock and disbelief that a global pandemic could effectively close the world down, they quickly looked for the business silver lining.

“In closely analysing our occupancy figures, we found we generally have a 50/50 split between Australian/other international and New Zealand travellers/corporate guests, so we felt we were actually better-placed than many others in the industry who are more dependent on overseas guests,” she said.

“The flip side is that the average room rate is moderately lower, but we have encouraged more direct bookings through our own website, cutting companies such as Booking.com and Expedia, and reducing the amount of third-party commission we pay.

“We have also reduced the number of in-bound tour operators that we offered credit to, due to poor communication and slow payment timelines when COVID-19 arrived.”

Barons explained that they developed a brand new County Hotel website to further stimulate direct business and she expects that 70 percent of all future bookings will be made and pre-paid, through that site.

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ANGELA BARONS, OWNER, THE COUNTY HOTEL, NAPIER

“We have a very strong online presence and can be found on all relevant social media platforms.

“Although the average age of our customer is 55-plus, they are astute and technologically-savvy.

“We were also holding large forward bookings for Australian golfing groups for 2020/2021, however, these will likely be pushed to 2022 when border rules are clearer.”

Barons said it is encouraging that boutique travel companies paying large non-refundable deposits, are still planning tours here once the borders open and she’s confident New Zealand will be showered with overseas tourists in due course.

“Our marketing strategy for the hotel since the first lockdown and now, beyond, is simply to focus on operating a successful business based on New Zealand travellers only.

“We will treat overseas travellers as a bonus, and we have restructured the more-expensive cost centres within the hotel.

“Since reopening after the first lockdown, we have generated a fresh database of high-quality clients that have stayed with us two or three times in the last seven months, which is extraordinary really.

“Being voted in the top one percent of hotels in the world by Tripadvisor is a huge accomplishment and love them or hate them, travellers use this site before making their accommodation bookings.”

The County Hotel’s Wine Street Restaurant and Churchill’s Bar have been “little show stoppers” since lockdowns eased, according to Barons.

“However, for greater efficiencies, we have restructured how we operate both the bar and restaurant, with reduced hours and fewer staff, and have a pre-order Euro-Continental breakfast available for guests which saves on our kitchen wage bill.

“Over the last six weeks, our restaurant and bar bookings have increased significantly as a result of our social media presence and the high-quality experience we deliver which is exciting, as food and beverage traditionally played second fiddle to the accommodation strand of the business.”

CHRISTCHURCH MUSINGS

The established Sarin Hotel Group which represents a number of well-known global brands in the accommodation market nationwide, boldly opened its first designer boutique hotel in Christchurch, mid-2020.

Bold, because the country was then still firmly in pandemic-watch mode, and the prospect of open borders to international guests was very much a pipe dream.

The boutique 4-star Muse Art Hotel in Manchester Street occupies an acclaimed 1960s seven-storey former office block, originally home to the Canterbury Terminating Building Society.

Designed by colourful Christchurch architect, Peter Beaven and notable for its mid-century modernism design, the building has been empathetically reimaged into an intimate, bespoke and quirky hotel.



The Muse Art Hotel, Christchurch.

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UDAI SARIN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, SARIN HOTEL GROUP

Udai Sarin, chief executive officer for the Sarin Hotel Group, said the 40-room hotel, complete with the Pink Lady rooftop bar and in-house cafe, The Residency, is tracking well – largely thanks to its niche appeal.

“It’s not a cookie-cutter style of hotel and because it’s small, we can be nimble in our approach to marketing and service delivery.

“Each floor features work by a different local Canterbury artist and each room is individually furnished and decorated.

“Our clientele to date has mainly been Aucklanders, South Island-based self-drive couples and the corporate market.”

Sarin said it was never really an option to halt work on The Muse because of the pandemic.

“We wanted to get open and get going,” he said.

“We backed ourselves and have made the most of the market – even though it is quite different to initial projections.”

ON THE BOULEVARD

Featuring 10 spacious rooms, each with a balcony, thermally-heated spa pool and uninterrupted lake views, on the Taupo lakefront near the famed Hot Water Beach, Boulevard Waters is a boutique offering that has excelled in the tourism sector’s disrupted trading year.

“THE JULY SCHOOL HOLIDAYS FELT LIKE HIGH SEASON WITH OCCUPANCY ON PAR WITH A TRADITIONAL FEBRUARY.”

SEAN CAMPBELL, OWNER, BOULEVARD WATERS, TAUPO

“The July school holidays felt like high season with occupancy on par with a traditional February and it definitely helped that the majority of people could drive to us rather than navigate tricky airline protocols.”

Campbell said they’ve been extremely proactive with their targeted social media marketing and note people are generally opting to pick up the phone to reserve a room rather than go via third-party booking sites.

“That’s been a step-change, and is testimony to New Zealanders wanting to support local.

“I think people have appreciated the fact that Boulevard Waters is one of only a select few accommodation complexes right on the waterfront, and is an easy walk to the town centre or to Two Mile Bay in the other direction.

“With only 10 rooms, we can offer individual attention and it’s the little things that elevate our business in the market – like the Nespresso machines, quality toiletries, the standard of the linen and soft furnishings and the retro Kiwi pop art on the walls.”



Boulevard Waters, Taupo.