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The Betsy South Beach

by Tony Smyth, 18 November 2010

"Lighting is always a very important aspect of design," says Santoro. "For the Betsy we considered not only the light we added using unique fixtures but also the natural lighting from outside, which because of the exposure of the hotel on the beach is a fundamental part of the perception of the whole space. So we dedicated part of the design to creating a way to let light in and to let light out at night."

Three Fortuny Chandeliers cast a welcoming illumination over the lobby in the evenings.

Guestrooms have been styled to evoke a casual elegance with an Island tropical feel. Wooden ceiling fans gently waft the sea breezes throughout the bright interiors accented by antique furniture pieces and the natural colouring of the surrounding area.

The listed status of the building meant that careful attention had to be given to programme and plan the spaces. The design team found that for some rooms the building regulations limited the space available but in others they were able to expand and divided the rooms into categories of sizes: standard, medium and suites.

The owners have outsourced their food and beverage operations and the BLT Steak (Bistro Laurent Tourondel) situated in the lobby adds a homely ambience as guests arrive at the reception. Tourondel's company also operate the relaxed and casual lobby bar which is studded with palms, ceiling fans and plantation style chairs. The rooftop deck also has a bar and looks across Ocean Drive to the beach and the sea beyond.

"We love the sails we used to shade the lounge areas and the spa cabanas on the roof top," enthuses Santoro. "It's a special feature, creating a technological but traditional element and at the same time a grand feeling of the sea's proximity, the wind blowing and the power of the Floridian sun."

But what is perhaps the most stark contrast to the homely feel of The Betsy is the B Bar which occupies a semi-basement that until recently was a low-ceiling store room. This dark hued, softly lit bar exudes urban sophistication and elegance. Reminiscent of a New York speakeasy the space is described as a 'jewel box'.

Designed by international hospitality designer Callin Fortis, principal of Bigtime Design Studios, guests enter the bar via a dimly lit passage that still suggests its service past. Fortis has included optical illusion as part of the magic that transforms this otherwise claustrophobic space. By using a reflective vinyl that acts as a mirror he ostensibly enlarges the visual feeling of space exponentially.

The shocker comes when the DJ starts playing and the ceiling starts to vibrate. All part of the fun!

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