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Discreet? Yes. Small scale? Absolutely not

The new Woodward hotel in Geneva has a certain ‘woo-war’ factor – and it’s mostly to do with size. Steven King checks in



Clean sweep: the Woodward offers both lake and mountain views

Though I own neither a hotel nor a dog and have no children, I imagine that naming a hotel is significantly more stressful than naming a puppy, but only slightly less so than naming a baby. You want to get it right. Geneva’s latest five-star hotel, which opened last week, is called the Woodward, for no apparent reason. Yet somehow it works. It reminds me of the old gag: why does Edward Woodward have so many Ds in his name? Because without them he’d be E-war Woo-war. I would love to hear Al Pacino tell that joke, in his best Scent of a Woman, quiet-then-shouty mode, with an extended, rising Eeee-waaar culminating in an ecstatic Woo-war!

This bricks-and-mortar Woodward has big-time “woo-war” factor. It is outwardly *comme il faut* – a creamy belle époque affair in a prime spot on the rive droite of Lake Geneva just beyond the Bains des Pâquis. Built in 1901 as a grand hotel, it was later converted into apartments, then offices, then a bank. Despite its long lakeside frontage, the entrance is off the main drag to one side. “How discreet,” you might think, arriving for the first time. “How

charmingly small-scale and lowkey.” Discreet it may be. But, as you quickly come to realise, there is nothing small-scale or low-key about the place.

Having crossed the threshold, the ceiling above you is a good 26ft high – not that you can be entirely sure, since a crystal chandelier the size of an outback rainwater tank obscures the view. The Victorian-style lift, richly slathered in crimson lacquer, into which you step a moment later, might have been transplanted, still beating, from the Savoy in London, so closely does it resemble Richard D’Oyly Carte’s “ascending room” – the 19th-century mechanical marvel that justified his charging full whack for previously inconvenient rooms on the upper storeys.

Moments later, you are deposited in what the Woodward’s management refers to not as the lobby but the Salon. The natural light that beams in through an uninterrupted row of floor-to-ceiling windows on one side of the room is bounced back again by walls panelled in Macassar ebony on the other side, the wood so glossy that you may discern on its surface the reflection of Mont Blanc.

These cleverly stage-managed interiors are the work of Pierre-Yves Rochon – who is no stranger to Geneva, having overseen the relatively recent renovations of both the Beau Rivage (a five-minute stroll away) and the Hôtel des Bergues (10 minutes).



‘Cleverly stage-managed interiors’ feature floor-to-ceiling windows that let in plenty of natural light



Swiss role: the food is overseen by acclaimed chef Olivier Jean

All of Geneva’s top hotels contain suites of surpassing splendour. The Woodward, however, is the only one that contains nothing but suites – no rooms, all suites, and just 26 of them, making it by far the smallest five-star in town. The knockout design of the Woodward’s public spaces is toned down in the suites, but not much. They, too, are a quiet riot of

meticulously curated materials, from the almost psychedelic straw-marquetry sliding bedroom doors to the translucent Lalique knobs on the bathroom cabinets with their miniature Medusa motifs. Devotees of the Oetker Collection of hotels – to which the Woodward belongs and which also includes Le Bristol in Paris, the Lanesborough in London and Brenners Park in Baden-Baden – will be delighted, though not surprised.

The Genevois love to eat out and I suspect that both of the hotel's restaurants – the vegetable-led Le Jardinier on the first floor and an outpost of the Atelier Robuchon empire au sous-sol, both run by executive chef Olivier Jean – will be a hit with locals as well as guests. Le Jardinier is as bright and fresh as the Palm House at Kew, each table graced, at the time of my visit, with a single hydrangea and a few wispy blades of miscanthus. While not strictly vegetarian, the menu is biased towards dishes free from meat, dairy and gluten in which proteins play second fiddle to vegetables, not the other way round.

Given the emphasis on fresh-as-the-morning-dew ingredients, I wondered briefly whether “heirloom” tomatoes had, by definition, any place in such a restaurant, but I ordered them regardless. They were superb and clearly had weeks to go before they reached the heirloom stage. An intriguing wine list has been assembled which, in accordance with the restaurant's locavore emphasis, follows the course of the Rhône from its source in the Swiss Alps to its mouth in the Mediterranean.

L'Atelier, meanwhile, is as infernally dark and satanically sexy as, well, any of the other Robuchon restaurants you may have eaten in from New York to Hong Kong. And still with the best mashed potato on earth.

The hotel's Guerlain spa is likely to exert a similar magnetism. A treatment will leave you smelling not only of roses but also, in all likelihood, of some delicious combination of ylang-ylang, sandalwood, bergamot, vanilla and angelica. Other wellness facilities include a 21m pool, two saunas, two steam rooms, a hot tub and a gym.

Should you wish to give your biceps a few more reps, you can do so, odd as it may well sound, in the adjoining cigar lounge. This is located in the former bank vault and – marvellously – is entered through the original steel door with a “No smoking” sign engraved on it.

Quibbles? Qualms? Not really. My state-of-the-art, RFID-enabled, Nasaapproved key fob repeatedly failed to activate the lift, and operating the tablet-controlled lights in my suite was, for me at least, nigh on impossible. But these tech-related wrinkles will no doubt have been ironed out before you even read this. And if you were to go to the Woodward and find yourself back in your digs after dinner unable to turn on the lights, you might, as I did, take this minor inconvenience as an opportunity to enjoy the lovely contrasting textures of wood, silk, mother-of-pearl and marble, as you feel your way around in the dark in search of an actual old-fashioned switch.

And if your fancy fob refuses to summon the lift to convey you back downstairs to seek assistance with the lights, taking the stairs is not a chore but a pleasure. The walls are hung with black-and-white photographs of film stars, society beauties and hale outdoorsy types

engaged in wholesome Alpine pursuits. And then at last you will emerge into the swirl and swank of the lobby – sorry, the Salon – and it is “woo-war!” all over again.

The Woodward (00 41 22 901 3700; oetkercollection.com) offers suites from £943 including breakfast. Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions. See Page 5