

Human-Scale Hoteling

The popularity of boutique hotels rises in Shanghai
By Harold Kok



Pier One:
stylish living

Shanghai is in the run-up to a boutique hotel boom, but few would have guessed that it is fueled by the mega-developer of one of Shanghai's most recognizable tourist spots.

In November 2002, property developer Shui On Land opened the 88 Xintiandi Executive Residence in their old-meets-new Xintiandi property in Luwan district. The 53-room property was intended as a serviced apartment at first, but eventually morphed into a boutique hotel when management observed that guests were staying days and weeks rather than months.

Johannes Qiang, who worked at 88 after it was repurposed into a hotel, said Shui On Land learned how to operate a boutique property from scratch over the years. For a company the size of Shui On Land, which went public at the end of last year at a total value of nearly US\$800 million, learning how to operate a small property seemed an unlikely part of the company DNA.

But learn it did, and in doing so, it helped set the conditions for the

boutique hotel wave poised to begin in Shanghai today. "88 Xintiandi was like a bridge for the new boutique hotels," Qiang said, and he should know. After years in the hotel industry, working at the huge five-star properties that dominate Shanghai's hotel scene, he learned the ins and outs of the hotel industry on a small scale while at 88. He is now general manager at JIA Shanghai, the new, ultra-trendy offshoot of its sister boutique hotel in Hong Kong designed by Philippe Starck. Many of his colleagues from 88, he says, are applying the lessons they learned there to the city's new outcrop of smaller, but no less fashionable, hotels.

Besides JIA Shanghai, hotels like The Mansion on Xinle Lu, Pudi Hotel in Fuxing Park and Pier One, part of a riverside complex, have all mushroomed in the last year or two.

All of them tout intimacy and exclusivity, guaranteed by the property's small number of rooms and often high rates, and an emphasis on design done well rather than the resort-style facilities of a traditional five-star tower.

"Without any doubt, there is a serious boutique hotel boom in Shanghai," said Jonathan Hasson, a director at Luxury Concierge China. "Cities like Shanghai and Beijing are saturated with four- and five-star hotels. Boutique hotels are a great alternative, generally offering a more personalized service, and this in a trendy, happening and original environment."

It's not just the cities that are changing. The types of people coming to Shanghai now have different expectations that traditional hotels may not satisfy.

"The high-end traveler is always searching for a new and unique experience, and this starts with accommodation," Hasson said. "These types of travelers are flowing into Shanghai in large numbers, and therefore there is a high demand for such types of properties."

Indeed, at the time of writing, JIA had been open for just a week, but almost all the available rooms were already occupied or booked. JIA takes the idea of personalized service seriously, evident



Photo by Don Yip

Jonathan Hasson
Director of Luxury Concierge China, at the Mansion Hotel

even in its name, which means "family" in Mandarin.

"All staff are like family members to us, and guests are treated like guests of our home," said Qiang. "We will remember what kind of pillow a guest likes; whether he prefers to use a hard or soft toothbrush."

JIA is located in the heart of Shanghai's shopping district just off Nanjing Xi Lu, although you will scarcely notice its discreet entrance shielded by key-card access and one-way glass. On the other side of town is Pier One, which is within the Pier One entertainment complex on the historic Suzhou River.

While JIA underlines its hip urban credentials with giant Bearbrick figures greeting guests in its lobby, the 24-room Pier One plays up its river access and

Art Deco building. Few other hotels in Shanghai, for example, can offer guests a place to dock their yachts followed by a night out at two high-end clubs and a supperclub designed by a Michelin-starred chef.

Small, independent outfits like JIA and Pier One are prepping the ground for larger players to step in. Starwood Hotels' W brand will open W Shanghai in Pudong's Lujiazui financial district in December 2009. The 400-room hotel is not ostensibly a boutique property, although its design-conscious approach attracts many of the same guests who would otherwise choose an independent hotelier. In 2009, with the World Expo just around the corner, the W will no doubt be a hive of activity for the architects, thinkers and industrial designers who will descend on the city for the expo.

The new boutique hotel wave is gaining momentum across the country. A small chain called Hotel Kapok is already establishing stylish hotels in southern Chinese metropolises like Shenzhen and Guangzhou and smaller cities in the Yangtze River Delta like Wuxi. In Beijing, new properties like Hotel Côté Cour SL, a luxurious 14-room establishment in a historic hutong, are increasing the supply of interesting, stylish, small hotels.

One of Beijing's first boutique hotels was the Red Capital Residence, opened five years ago. With only five rooms, it has attracted press coverage from Vogue and GQ to Institutional

Investor and even this magazine.

"The hotel industry is developing really fast, especially in China. More and more hotels are opening, but hotel guests are still as demanding," Red Capital's general manager, Marcel, says. "But guests are [now] looking for a unique experience, something that can be a story to tell when they are back home." ■



Photo by Don Yip

Johannes Qiang
General Manager,
JIA Shanghai

Pier One at a Glance

- 24 suites, including an Emperor Suite, Empress Suite and, of course, a Concubine Suite
- Occupies the Art Deco-style 1932 Norway Stovia Brewery building, which later became the Shanghai Brewery
- Docking facilities for yachts that sail up the Suzhou River
- Minutes away from the edgy enclave of galleries and studios at 50 Moganshan Lu
- Attached to a restaurant, Mimosa, a bar, Monsoon, and a club, Minx.

88 Yichang Lu

5155-8399, 5155-8377
www.pierone-hotel.com
pierone@pierone-hotel.com

JIA Shanghai at a Glance

- Designed by top Melbourne architects BURO, with interiors by Hecker Phelan and Guthrie
- 55 rooms and suites
- Suites come with a standalone bar, fully stocked with liquors and bartending equipment
- One of the hottest boutique hotel brands at the moment
- A business center with meeting room and two computer terminals

931 Nanjing Xi Lu
6217-9000
rez@jiashanghai.com



Courtesy of Pier One

**Modern decor,
classic comfort**