Daring to be different

Hotel expert Lulu Townsend tells **Sarah Highfield** why character, not conformity, makes great hotels live long in the memory

For more than two decades, Lulu Townsend has been immersed in the world of luxury hospitality. From transforming her family's boutique property in Umbria, Palazzo Terranova, into a Condé Nast Traveller favourite, to advising global names such as The Langham Hotels, she has seen how design shapes a hotel's identity and the memories guests take away with them. Now, as Marketing Director of The Hotel Guru, she helps travellers discover hotels that stand out precisely because they dare to be different.

When we speak, she is clear and firm about what she calls the 'beige-ification' of hotels, a trend she believes is dulling the very joy of travel.

"Interiors should reveal where you are," says Townsend. "But too often they are reduced to beige, taupe, and cream. These palettes feel safe; they photograph well and appeal to everyone. But that safety comes at the cost of identity. A beige bedroom in Hong Kong looks identical to one in New York or Paris. You could be anywhere, and that is the problem."

The price of playing it safe

For Lulu, beige is more than a colour scheme; it signals a fear of risk. As hotel groups expand internationally, consistency trumps character. Yet today's travellers crave the opposite.

"People want authenticity," she explains. "They want to feel connected to a destination through local art, regional materials, or colours drawn from the landscape. Beige may soothe, but it rarely inspires, and inspiration is what lingers after checkout."

This philosophy drives The Hotel Guru's curated approach. Rather than listing endless lookalike properties, the site highlights hotels with distinct personalities, places that tell a story through design and history.

A sense of place

Lulu believes the antidote to beige lies with independents who design with courage and context. She cites Thyme in the Cotswolds as a prime example: blush-pink bathrooms, floral fabrics created in-house, and the Meadow Spa bathed in greens that echo the surrounding fields. "Every detail reflects the family's vision and the landscape. It is deeply personal and guests feel that."

In Florence, Lulu points to two striking examples of individuality done right. Stella d'Italia bursts with exuberant colour, bold furniture, and vivid art that celebrates Italian vibrancy. In contrast, The Place Firenze channels quiet sophistication through local tradition and craftsmanship that root guests firmly in Tuscan culture. Both, she says, prove that personality leaves a far deeper impression than uniform design.

Closer to home, Ockenden Manor in West Sussex blends centuries-old oak panelling with heritage tones, while its modern spa glows with natural light and soft greens inspired by the gardens. "It's a hotel with narrative depth," says Townsend. "The past and present converse beautifully through colour and light."

What these hotels share is bravery. "Colour is not a risk. It is a signature. When design reflects location, history, and personality, it creates an emotional imprint. Guests remember the velvet chair by the fire, the rose-pink bathroom, the curtains framing a view. Those memories bring them back."

The danger of beige, she warns, is forgettability. "It is the easy option. But in a crowded market, the last thing a hotel can afford to be is forgettable." She adds, "The 'b' in beige stands for boring."

Clockwise from main: Bold hues at Ockenden Manor; Thyme embraces the great outdoors; quiet sophistication at The Place Firenze; Stella d'Italia bursts with exuberant colour

> People want to feel connected to a destination
>
> **Lulu Townsend**

A new chapter for hotel design

Despite much of the industry becoming increasingly uniform, Lulu is hopeful. "Travellers are demanding more individuality, storytelling, and a sense of place. The hotels that embrace this and wear their colours with pride, will not just stand apart; they will endure."

For those searching for such places, The Hotel Guru remains a trusted guide. Its editorial and independent approach celebrates hotels that reject conformity and embrace creativity. In a world awash with beige, Lulu reminds us that true luxury is not about playing it safe, it is about having the confidence to be unmistakably yourself. *

Further information

See more from Stella d'Italia and The Place Firenze in Sarah's Florence feature on p12. For Thyme and Ockenden Manor head to thehotelguru.com