

# WHERE TO STAY

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## Welcome to Wanderland

*When it opens later this year,  
Mondrian Doha is poised to change the region's  
hotel design game, finds RHEA SARAN*

Cloud-like trees and  
chandeliers create a  
fantastical world at  
Mondrian Doha



From left: Crystal showers in the women's spa; inside Morimoto Doha; large "miniature" painting in a guest room; the bridal suite's changing room. Below: Chef Masaharu Morimoto

## THE INTERIOR IS NOT JUST THERE, IT'S ALWAYS A SUBJECT OF CON

## VERSATION, ADDING TO THE EXPERIENCE, MAKING IT EXTRAORDINARY

**M**Y MOST DISTINCT ALICE IN Wonderland moment at the not-yet-open Mondrian Doha was while wandering down a curving hallway of doors in the sprawling 2,000sqm ESPA spa. No two doorways were the same, and I had the sudden feeling that if I opened one I'd find myself confronted by a table with glass vials labelled "Drink Me".

In reality, of course, any vials behind these closed doors would likely be filled with essential oils, and the only shrinking happening would be of guests' stress levels during one of the spa's signature treatments.

With interiors dreamt up by Dutch design legend Marcel Wanders, the Mondrian Doha is a masterful marriage of tradition and modernity, local and international elements.

The hotel, in West Bay, is housed in a building designed by Southwest Architecture to represent Qatar's national bird, the falcon. This is one of the many themes Wanders has used in his multi-layered, fantastical interior design: falcon motifs pop up in unexpected places, including on the chairs at the head of the long dining tables in the penthouse suites. But there's plenty else to unravel. The cloud-like trees in one of the ground floor salons, the multi-storey twisty stairway to nowhere in the lobby lounge, the crystal chandelier showerheads in the ladies spa, the 3D-shaped sand-dune-esque carpets in the guest rooms, the VIP bridal suite from which the bride descends into the ballroom in a gold elevator or down a dramatic staircase.

And then there are the restaurants. The hotel will house outlets by two celebrity chefs – Wolfgang Puck and Masaharu

Morimoto. When I visited, chef Morimoto was in town and had recently returned from a trip to the fish market. "People in Japan can't imagine that there is so much fresh seafood in this region," he told me. "I went yesterday, and there was fresh catch from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Egypt. It inspired my imagination to find creative ways to use the local fish. There were groupers, snappers, mackerel, shrimp, squid... I may not need to bring in seafood from anywhere else." Morimoto Doha is one of the few spaces not designed by Wanders; Japanese interior designer Yasumichi Morita is responsible for striking features such as the chandelier made up of Kyoto and Nara temple lanterns (which, fittingly, resemble Arabian lanterns) and for commissioning artist Hiroshi Senju's silkscreens of waterfalls. When it opens, guests can expect Morimoto signatures



including the tuna "pizza" that the chef calls a gateway dish for those new to Japanese food and eating raw.

Rounding out the dining options will be a Qatari restaurant, a burger spot, an outpost of Magnolia Bakery and a nightclub. Other amenities include an indoor pool under a glass dome resembling a vintage Tiffany stained-glass lamp, a gym, a business and meeting centre, the aforementioned ballroom and bridal suite, the spa and salons for both men and women.

Even at first glance, the Mondrian Doha is clearly not the sort of place you can visit just once. The wealth of design details and various elements of surprise reveal themselves each time you walk back into any of its spaces. It may not have opened yet, but it's easy to see that the design bar for hotels has already been irrevocably raised.

### IN CONVERSATION WITH MARCEL WANDERS

#### How important is the overall destination to you when designing a hotel?

It is one of the key elements. We do both product design and interior design. We design a chair, for instance, that could go anywhere in the world and would have to adapt to the place. Yet, if you do an interior, that project is not going anywhere, it has no feet. If you fly from New York or Tokyo to Doha, you want to stay in a hotel that feels like you are in Doha. So it's our task to create something that is authentic to the place. We don't want to make something that already exists, we want to make something new, but it has to breathe Doha, make you feel as if you're there. It's something we study by being in a place, going to other venues, talking to people, looking at what's ▶

## MONDRIAN DOHA



**Clockwise from top:** A duplex penthouse suite; the carpet mimics the texture of sand; golden falcon eggs and desert flowers



happening in the cultural scene in the place and studying the history.

### What are some of the local elements you've incorporated?

An important part are the colour and material schemes. There are local styles that are interesting, or elements we look at. For instance, the lamps that you find in the lounge or the miniature paintings in the guest rooms, or even the 3D shaping of the carpeting to look like sand. Then there are the horses in the corridors and the falcons. The exterior is a good example of a building that is modern but made for the region. It has the concept of being a falcon on a nest – it's about family but also about falcons. We know people love falcons in the region, so we found ways to work with that. Right away when you enter the main entrance, you see columns with golden eggs. They are falcon eggs – now you've entered into the heart, the nest. And the sculpture in the centre is the main egg, and out of it grows a desert flower.

### When designing a hotel, is there a battle of form versus function?

I think function is super important and it has to work. If you make a hotel that doesn't function, the personnel cannot move around; if chairs aren't at the right level, people get irritated. For us, functionality is something that should be there but you shouldn't see it. We hide the things you don't want to have part of your visual experience under layers of beauty and decoration.

### Tell us about the iconic staircase.

The Doha hotel is the sister hotel of the one we designed in Miami. So we picked the most important icons from the other hotel and reimagined them in a new way here. The stairs in Miami have become an icon. They are stairs that lead to nowhere really. But people see it as an experience in itself, they want to have photographs taken. Here, the staircase has a round quality and we took it two-and-a-half stories higher.

### Why design very different male and female spaces in the spa?

In the typical Western view, it may be strange to think about how different men and women are and that they live in distinct worlds. Yet I think it's one of the elements that adds to the local flavour. So we did a fantastically feminine spa and a fantastically male spa. They're so different that people can't explain it. Each has no idea what the other has experienced. I think that's a beautiful thing, because they are now curious, there's a fantasy about the other world. Besides that, the base concept of the spa in both areas was to have a little bit of a souk. There's elements of surprise, of wonder, as you stroll through.

### The hotel's bridal suite that leads down to the ballroom is unique. How do you get into the mind of a bride?

It sounds difficult because I'm a man. But I try to create a sense of empathy for people. I'm designing for my audience and sometimes my audience is very indistinct: It's Tuesday afternoon, 3 o'clock, someone walks in, could be a man or woman, could be for business or leisure – that's difficult. Other times the person is very distinct. It's a woman from the Middle East, she's going to get married, it's her day, she's going to arrive and stay for the day, everybody is going to show up. To have such clarity on what the experience can or should be makes it wonderful, I can be very expressive.

### Tell us about some of the art in the hotel.

I'm a big fan of the miniatures from the Middle East, but we didn't want to put in classic miniatures. We wanted to make a play on it, so we have been working on the paintings for months in the studio to make the biggest miniatures in the world. I wanted to make it rich, powerful, colourful, with these wonderful stories embedded. We are also preparing videos of falcon heads. We've seen images where people are standing still and it looks like a photo then suddenly, boom, it moves and it turns out to be a video. With animals, you can rarely do that, but falcons have this fantastic ability to sit completely still and then suddenly make a move.

### What emotions do you want people to feel when they walk in?

I cannot determine what people will feel, but I can try to work in a few different elements. I can make spaces that are great for a nice dinner, or for a calming spa experience. I can tie together elements so there's always something exciting. The interior is not just there, it's always a little bit of a subject, adding to the experience, making it extraordinary. I hope that people leave with a sense of fulfillment and joy. I hope they will bring memories home, I hope they will go to the next place and talk about it. 🍷