

# European Destinations

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## Barcelona's hotels pioneer a new blend of domestic chic

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The city has restricted new openings as it struggles to cope with a surge in visitor numbers, but not before the launch of a final crop of hip, homely retreats designed to counter the 'Airbnb effect'

If the combination of restrained chic and reassuring homeliness is a common denominator in the new Barcelona hotels, the Serras, a year-old property on the old harbour-front of Port Vell — within a few steps of the upcoming Soho House, which was due to open in 2014 but is still a shell — is very much on-trend. The fifth-floor suite at the Serras is one of the most beguiling hotel rooms I have stayed in, with a nuanced design and a quality of workmanship in everything from bathroom fittings to cupboard doors (not to mention the harbour views), that make a deep impression. Yet with just 30 rooms, the atmosphere remains intimate and friendly. "People are so tired of big hotels — all those endless corridors," says general manager Antonio Bignone, formerly of the Bulgari in London, adding that, significantly for him, the Serras' interior designer, Eva Martínez, had always specialised in private homes.

The restaurant at Hotel Brummell

As I stare into the bathroom mirror after a long train trip, a painted message on the glass tells me (unconvincingly): "You look amazing!" Other messages I pick up around my room at the Cotton House Hotel are more subliminal. The minibar here stocks not Coke and Veuve Clicquot but lemonade from a farmers' co-op and crisps hand-fried in Ibiza. Swatches of fabric come with a note: a shirt can be made up for me, if I so wish, by a tailor around the corner. The subtext is the degree of attention being lavished on me, and the team of dedicated craftspeople toiling somewhere nearby to bring me genuinely "tailor-made" and additive-free experiences.



Hotels are faithful reflectors of cultural trends, and Barcelona, as a world tourist capital that last year smashed its own record once again, registering 8.3m hotel stays (a 5.4 per cent increase on 2014), is as good a place as any to take note of the latest novelties.

In the past quarter-century, no less than 18 hotels of five-star level have opened in the city (bringing the total to 28), and most of these have been symphonies in glitter and glam, flaunting their luxury in highly polished surfaces and attention-grabbing contemporary furniture.

But the current wave of smart hotels, examples being the Brummell, Margot House, the Serras, Cotton House, none of which is much more than a year old, and Casa Bonay, which opened last month, is taking the genre in curious new directions. These newcomers are all what we used to call boutique hotels, the Barcelona trend being forever fewer rooms and a service ethic that tries ever harder to second-guess the client's whims. If the previous wave of scary-chic places seemed deliberately unhomely, there's a perceptible tendency nowadays — perhaps as a reaction to the rise of Airbnb and house-swapping websites — towards hotels that feel like they might just be somebody's home, even if it's not yours. Quirkiness and originality are actively cultivated. Terms such as "handmade", "artisan", and "locally sourced" are bandied about. All of which suggests, perhaps, that hipster values and aesthetics have finally reached the top end of the hotel mainstream.