

Unexpected Spaces

Luxury does not mean bland. From forts to warehouses and treehouses to trains, some of Britain's coolest abodes are using unusual structures to generate the 'wow' factor. Giselle Whiteaker seeks out some interesting places to stay.

The lights of Canary Wharf glow in the darkness providing a spectacle for the guests seated by the picture windows in Sunborn London's chic restaurant. Waiters glide around the room, deftly sliding plates of exquisite fare in front of the diners for delectation, while down the spiral staircase, past the intricate chandelier in the reception atrium, Joanna Jaworska is laying her soothing hands on a guest's temples as part of an Elemis spa ritual. Like many hotels in the luxury category, the Sunborn boasts spectacular water views. Unlike others, this is because it is floating on the Thames at Royal Victoria Dock. Sunborn London is a super yacht, combining the allure of an intimate cruise ship with the convenience of a luxury hotel.

Sunborn London launched last year, in the wake of her sister yacht's debut in March 2014 in Gibraltar. She's a stunning sight moored next to ExCel London exhibition site, her 394-foot sleek lines designed to carve the seven seas. The five-storey property's 136 rooms are spacious and tastefully decorated and there's none of the pokiness so often associated with shipboard living. There are also no hokey onboard activities. It's a cruise without the cringe and all within the confines of the city.

The expectation is that the yacht-hotel hybrid will make London her permanent home, but Sunborn suggests that one of the unique strengths of its fleet is that the ships can set sail should the situation require. Even without putting out to sea, the hotel evokes the romantic image of luxury yachting, worlds away from the bustle of the city. That alone may be what entices guests on board. That and the superb service.

Sunborn London is the Capital's only floating hotel, although the company already has another yacht lined up for Barcelona and there are further buoyant abodes in the planning stages. But Sunborn London is not the only way to stay on the water in the UK. Out in the Solent strait near Portsmouth, another rather unique address awaits.

Spitbank Fort is one of a small collection of historic sea fortresses originally designed to protect Portsmouth harbour from a French invasion in the 19th Century. The fortresses were awarded the nickname "Palmerston's Follies" after Prime Minister Palmerston who commissioned their construction. They were never used in defense despite being armed to the hilt. De-activated at the end of the war and

decommissioned in 1956, Spitbank Fort is now armed in a somewhat different manner – with an array of contemporary luxuries that have turned it into a unique 9-bedroom exclusive hotel.

"The refurbishment was sympathetic keeping many of the original features, making it the most luxurious way to enjoy history," touts Oliver Bell, Co-founder of Oliver's Travels. Spitbank Fort has undergone a £3 million overhaul, equipping it with a few of life's necessities – a champagne bar, a library, gym, two sun-decks and a sauna. And while the idea of a mid-water isolated fort may sound a little chilly for some, the fire pit and hot tub are the perfect place to warm up and toast passing ships.

"It's important to be unique because people want to stay somewhere a little different to what they're used to. People's time off is precious and they want to make the most of their leave by booking somewhere to remember. However, what is most important in the luxury market is offering an experience and service that are memorable and seamless," says Bell. If arriving by boat on your own private fortress-island fails to create a memorable experience, a second fortress – No Man's Land Fort – is opening soon with its own helipad, 22 bedrooms and four floors of facilities.



Sunborn London

Repurposing historic buildings and turning them into unique, specialised properties is a savvy investment. Not only does it add appeal for modern luxury travellers, who are stepping away from generic hotels and seeking off-the-beaten-path experiences to write home about, but it also aids in the preservation of history. "There are some really quirky and unique venues all over the world that won't be used for their original purpose. It's hard to imagine that a building so full of character can be left abandoned or unused," says Bell.

Kerry Smith the Director of Sales and Marketing at Titanic Hotel on Stanley Dock in Liverpool sees enormous value in this kind of adaptive reuse. "The number of hotels just in Liverpool has grown immensely in the past 10 years. I think the importance of restoring historic buildings and bringing the city's heritage back to life is certainly the start of a new trend," she says. The 153-room Titanic Hotel, renamed in recognition to the city's connection to the famous liner, was the first major investment and redevelopment project of its kind in the North of the city. "The result of this gallant step into a new future for the much-neglected area is that this is a catalyst for the major

investment which will follow, transforming the historic dockland into a new and exciting district," says Smith.

Stanley Dock opened in 1848 and played a role in turning Liverpool into an international seaport in the mid-19th century. The scale of the warehouses and the goods stored within reflected the ambition of Liverpool's Dock Committee and the commercial might of the port. It was the first dock in the world to boast multi-modal transport connections, linking directly to both the canal and railway systems. It closed in 1985 and went into hibernation, ready for rebirth mid-2014.

"The Titanic Hotel, Stanley Dock, Liverpool is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the heart of Liverpool's maritime district. It is filled with character and history. Converting a building of such grandeur was always going to be a challenge. Our aim was to ensure qualities the building carried in the 19th century were reflected in the luxury hotel it is today," says Smith

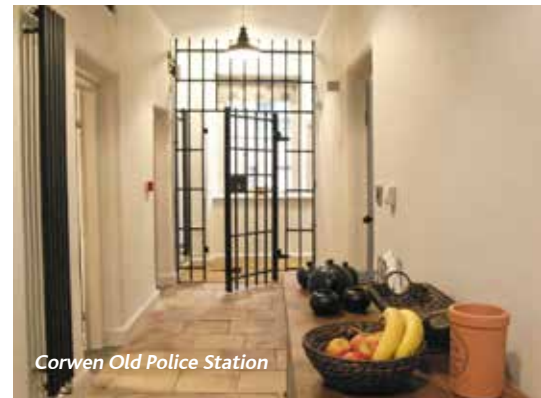
The original high ceilings and brick and iron features and the corridors as wide as roads were retained within the £35 million redevelopment. The 1855 warehouse's contemporary twists include a private spa, open theatre-style kitchen and VIP bar. The hotel's waterside terrace is staged to have views across the dock to the Pumping Station and the immense Tobacco Warehouse, described as the largest brick building in the world when it was built in the 1900s and soon to be the site of the next phase of development. Far from sinking, this Titanic is heralding a new lease on life for Stanley Dock and offering opulent digs for visitors to Liverpool.

History is a common theme uniting many of Britain's idiosyncratic accommodation options. The 900-year old Amberley Castle at the foot of the South Downs in Sussex is enclosed by a 60-foot-high curtain wall and portcullis that remains open. The market town of Corwen in Wales houses visitors in the 1871-built Old Police Station, the original barred gate and cell corridor and the solid cell doors with peepholes now giving way to comfortable living quarters. The Great Western Railway slip coach Mevy was taken out of service in the 1930s and now offers first-class accommodation at St Germans in Cornwall. Water tanks and windmills, lighthouses and follies; all have been saved from decay by lavish reinvention.

If history fails to impress, nature can provide inspiration. The Chewton Glen Luxury Spa Hotel combines both. The country house has a fascinating past, but is also looking to the future. Chewton Glen has taken contemporary luxury to new heights by spending £7 million



Spitbank Fort



Corwen Old Police Station



Titanic Hotel

building treehouses. The spectacular arboreal abodes are high in the canopy, built on stilts using materials that blend beautifully into the New Forest surroundings.

Nestled into a wooded valley, floor to ceiling windows provide panoramic forest views and flood the suites with light. The forest hideaways offer a new perspective in a secluded setting, yet are minutes away from the main house for those who want to forgo the fruits of the forest for Chewton Glen's exceptional spa.

It's clear that hotels can no longer be defined only by the amenities they provide. The modern traveller is looking for more. Britain's savvy accommodation providers are moving luxury into unexpected spaces – from the canopy to the sea – and making hotels part of the travel tale.