

LABOUR OF LOVE

Natasha Borg has been collecting furniture for a while. Now, these painstakingly restored authentic vintage pieces have found their rightful place in the eclectic design of an Old Bakery Street boutique hotel. Every corner of The Coleridge has a story to tell.

PHOTOS: SEAN MALLIA

When Natasha Borg and Trevor Zahra got their hands on 89, Old Bakery Street, Valletta, the façade of the 17th-century three-storey house was scarred by some intrusive interventions that took place over recent years. But it didn't take long for the accretions – “anything that wasn't authentic to the place, the period and Valletta” – to be stripped off.

Natasha wouldn't have it any other way. With a background in History of Art & Architecture, Culture Planning & Regeneration, it is not surprising that the rationale was to retain and regenerate as much as possible of the house's original character and features.

Being eco-conscious – even the hotel's stationery is recycled and toiletries refillable – the starting point was to restore what they could, which never means taking the easy way out.

Inhabited when they bought it, minimal intervention was required in terms of civil works, so the initial idea was to embark on cosmetic design changes. But as the ball got rolling, there was no stopping them from delving into minute detail, turning the project into a labour of love and leaving no stone unturned... almost literally.

When digging for the lift, they discovered a cellar, which had been filled with debris. It was restored and turned into the dining room, where



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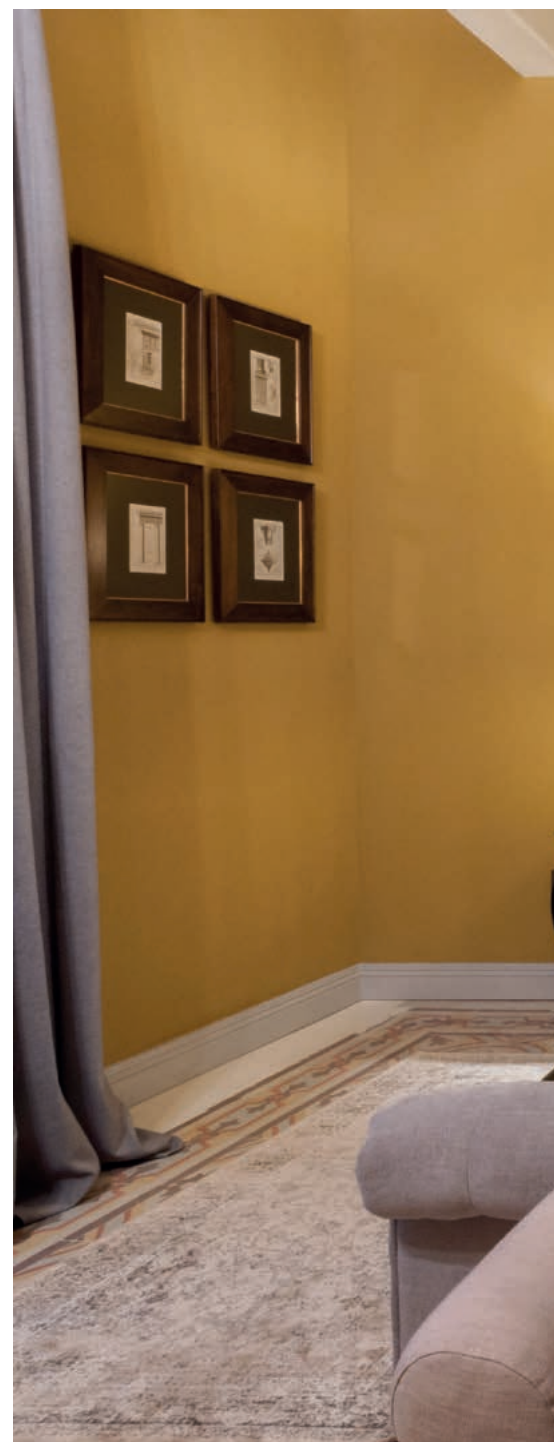
breakfast is served, and could also serve as storage for a small selection of fine wines.

Natasha and Trevor took on the arduous project management of the place and its interior design with full force – cutting no corners and probably complicating life. And finally, the fruits of what seemed to be a thankless task are starting to be reaped as The Coleridge welcomes its first guests.

The design concept was based on “respect” for the context, but

also on a passion for vintage pieces and creative recycling, which means barely any off-the-shelf items have been used to decorate its individual and distinct five rooms [soon to be six with the addition of a connecting duplex suite]. Many items were sourced by word of mouth and purchased locally and internationally. And restoration was the name of the game.

It would have been much easier to replace the doors, for example, but it's not Natasha's style. Each



one is original. Each was stripped to bare wood, restored and repainted [by a painter, and an artist for the detail] and modified to integrate the electronic lock system. These doors alone – the only items in the property that are all the same – required the work of several different craftsmen, not to mention removals and dismantling.



Looking back, it was a “nightmare”, Natasha admits. And it is not surprising either that she “almost had palpitations” when she was told she had no choice but to use stainless steel electronic lock system handles when the originals were brass and she had even sourced brass peepholes. But Trevor managed to eventually

track them down. And even the brass escutcheons were bought from abroad.

Like this story, there are others. In one of the suites, the lampshades by the bed are not only hanging, but also upside down. To do this, a bespoke metal structure had to be created [and hidden] to hold them up, and other details designed to

cover and tidy the alterations; then, of course, the shade had to be made...

As with most objects in this hotel, a whole lengthy process was involved and, sometimes, several hands. “It’s not so much the ideas,” Natasha says. “The problem, more than anything, is finding someone to execute them.”



Take, for example, the three-armed brass bedside wall lights in one of the rooms. They are more than what meets the eye; a complex process of restoring, replacing and rewiring, as well as re-upholstery.



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"They were one of the first pieces I bought. I even replaced the candle-like tube of worn-out plastic with hand-rolled paper I sourced from abroad....," she says.

Their shades are created from the same rich fabric of the pelmet and cushions... But only because Natasha has an eye for interiors. "It was actually passed onto me by a friend to use to cover and protect the

furniture while we were doing works. Originally, the fabric was a curtain in an old house. I gave it one look and fell in love with it, dry-cleaned it a few times and this is the result."

With an approach of the sort, it is no wonder that no two suites are the same; no two colours; no two pieces of furniture. Starting from the reception, with its panelling in a deep green and grey moulding, the



feeling is quintessentially English; but in the corridor, the stone slabs [xorok] are laid bare, moving onto the Maltese architectural feel.



A French flair is coupled with baroque and Art Deco touches too.

The rooms contain anything from period pieces from the 18th century to G Plan and flea market furniture, items from the 1970s, bought in auction sales, and modern Danish designs, all tastefully intertwined and with a story to tell.

"I used to just buy what I liked, but knowing the hotel was underway, I'd keep it in mind," Natasha says. Her antique wardrobes, French polished from scratch, have found the ideal use; chandeliers have been cleaned and rewired; and original 1920s bedside tables have the space for the bedpans.

The Napoleon chair in one of the spacious rooms was "battered and

horribly upholstered". It has been stuffed and looks as good as new and better. Opposite, a dainty bureau de dame doubles as the ideal and clever desk for a laptop. It needed light restoration and the back was upholstered in velvet, Natasha explains.

"It was originally designed to live with its back – in flat and unpolished wood – hidden against the wall. But it has been given a more three-dimensional use now, occupying the space in a different way..."

Natasha points out the different and pristine Art Deco chairs in the suites, and no one can miss the leather deco-style armchair, which lends itself beautifully to the room it is in – probably also because it is the space it has always occupied,

being one of the few pieces kept from the original house.

The art in the rooms, including several engravings, plays an important role for Natasha; each piece is original and was bought specifically for each suite. In one, the subject is architectural design and fortifications, with an interesting reference to an engineer who worked in Malta back in the day.

In another, Grand Masters' portraits, typical of old houses and usually lining the stairs, sourced a while back from a local auction, have been "integrated" in the lounge area, with a "more modern twist as they take centre stage".

Mirrored sconces were dismantled and recreated in a team effort, and Victorian glass shades



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are also linked to a saga: they were probably hanging, or on a lampstand, but Natasha's became wall lights to be sure she went down the more complicated route. The light fitting she designed had to be produced from scratch, which meant finding someone who works with brass and was willing and able to do the job. [Thanks go to her electrician, who patiently worked on all her light endeavours, she points out.]

When all was done and dusted, "we had to find the brass screws". In fact, it's not the first time Natasha and Trevor went to London and spent four days running around hardware stores for the right screws



and escutcheons. "Our holidays have been hilarious," she admits.

In fact, although most items have been recycled, some had to be sourced from overseas to meet Natasha's needs... down to the plant pots. And if she had to choose,





her pride and joy are the modern designer LED bulbs she turned into simple pendant bedside lights in the top-floor room, the Fayette Suite, which has a more modern feel, mixing rust with green and a feature wall of foliage wallpaper. "I could easily look at these bulbs for an hour," she says.

While the old Maltese tiles in the rooms were salvaged, where possible, and ceilings expose stone slabs and beams, the bathrooms have a more modern micro-cement finish. But each one stands out for its different vanities, some original, with antique marble surfaces, others in the form of a restored and reused antique table, as well as the modern concrete version.

The bottom line is that nothing is made to look old, Natasha insists. "All in all, it was a fun project,

especially in terms of colours, and here I was fortunate to be able to bounce off ideas with my good friend Henry," she adds.

Natasha loves the fact that The Coleridge is located at the bottom of Valletta – more easily accessible from below, in fact – with Fort St Elmo and the sea in its view.

"It's central, and yet, at the same time, it's not in the hustle and bustle of the city. While still having the advantage of being on one of its principle streets, you are not in the thick of it when you step out, and important sites like the Grand Master's Palace are just a road away. The whole area is being regenerated," says Natasha.

And it is, in fact, the address of the boutique hotel that inspired its name. Rather than go for the

obvious and focus on the period of the Knights of the Order of St John, Natasha and Trevor wanted the property to have a literary theme and toyed with various related ideas.

Since the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge spent some time in Malta and actually lived in Old Bakery Street, he was the obvious choice. And the names of the suites are all related to his poetry.

Yes, the anecdotes abound at The Coleridge. A former owner passes by and tells Natasha and Trevor the wood of the beams in one of the rooms was from the hull of a galleon from the time of the Knights.

So it seems the Order has managed to infiltrate the décor of this child-free, boutique hotel anyway to add to the exquisite eclectic mix that it is. **P**