

LUX

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LUXURY TRAVEL VIEWS

We journey from a ski-free village in Switzerland, to South America's cultural capital, and back to northern Europe



Vals is a small village high in a Swiss valley that goes nowhere. Unlike Zermatt or St Moritz, there is no skiing of note here. The attraction that brings people from around the globe are the thermal baths at Therme Vals, where the baths are walled in stone slabs hewn from the local peaks, enclosing the rooms in a modern, you might even say 'mountain brutalist', architecture designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. This is Le Corbusier reimagined for the high Alps, so no Norman Foster glass towers here. It could only have happened in Switzerland and it's enough for people to travel here from all around the globe, to

stay at the **7132 Hotel**. Guests tend to be artistic types themselves, or those who appreciate clever, contemporary architecture and design. Each room either inspired or designed by architects such as Kengo Kuma, Tadao Ando and Zumthor himself.

We stayed in a Zumthor room which was sparsely decorated, mostly white, cool, with a Manhattan-loft vibe and a terrace overlooking the snowy flank of a mountain. It's luxury in terms of price and service, but unpretentious and restrained in style, as you'd expect from an architect known for his minimalist designs.

Everything is crisp and modern, unusual in such a traditional Alpine setting. The hotel has bold touches, too – for instance, the restaurants are each named after a colour (Blue, Red and Silver, the last of these being the gourmet option with the tasting menu devised by Sven Wassmer).

The baths or Therme are the central attraction and are mesmerisingly beautiful, crafted from locally quarried Valser quartzite slabs (the texture and layering of the stone is part of what makes the interiors so astonishing) and containing separate, secret chambers or rooms that are designed to induce a particular feeling or atmosphere using combinations of light and sound. Some of the rooms are almost pitch black with just the ringing of bells and a bed to lie down on while others contain different pools for bathing (heated or chilled, scented with rose petals or mountain



1. **Box of Dreams**
| *The mountain view from one of the minimalist stone-clad rooms at the 7132 hotel in Vals*
2. **The Blue Yonder**
| *7132's lobby and reception with its bright blue carpet, a colour that is used throughout the hotel*
3. **Colombian Style**
| *A deluxe room in the Casa San Agustín, Cartagena*



- 4. **Ancient & Modern**
| A luxurious room at the Edinburgh Sheraton, with the a spectacular view of the castle

- 5. **Home Comforts**
| Part of the Alma Terraza restaurant at the Casa San Agustin hotel

- 6. **Glass Ceiling**
| The glazed canopy at the entrance to the newly refurbished Sheraton in Edinburgh



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herbs). One bath is reached by swimming through a very narrow stone pathway into a completely enclosed pool with a light chamber which echoes and reverberates soothingly as you speak. The main outdoor thermal bath releases clouds of steam into the cold Alpine air. Walking through the baths feels almost like a mystical journey, a return to nature at the same time as feeling out of this world. You can see why it is a place of pilgrimage, and perhaps not for the person keen on hiking or gliding down the slopes.

Casa San Agustin in Cartagena, Colombia is a small boutique hotel lying within refurbished white-washed colonial era buildings with bright pink bougainvillea spilling over the walls and into the interiors. Very calm and relaxed, the hotel pays humble respect to its beautiful, exotic surroundings and heritage, decorated rustically to feel more like a private residence. Rooms are light and open, some with wooden beamed ceilings, while the most luxurious suite has its own private plunge pool on a balcony that overlooks the top of the city. While the city is busy, hot and humid, Casa San Agustin feels like a cool secret, tucked away unassumingly down a cobbled street not far from the luxury shops and jewellers. Alma, the hotel's restaurant, is known as one of the best in the city, and dinner is accompanied by live music from a local Latin jazz band – the best tables are outside in the enclosed courtyard.



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Order a gin and tonic at the bar and it comes large, laden with ice, accompanied by olives, cured ham and hummus, a curiously delightful combination. The manager Nicolas Dominguez walks around slapping guests on their backs, laughing, pouring wine and treating everyone like they're part of his family. Many of those dining here are glamorous locals, part of the Cartagena cultural scene.

From Columbia to Caledonia, and another key element of the world's cultural scene, Edinburgh, and the **Sheraton Grand** in Edinburgh. A Sheraton may not be the first brand that springs to mind to enjoy Scotland's capital, but bear with us here. Our view at the Grand looked directly out to a panorama of the rocky, bleak bluff of Edinburgh Castle; you could lay siege to the place from the comfort of a contemporary-chic room. Walk up to the Castle, down the Royal Mile to Holyrood Palace and the Scottish Parliament building and then climb the mountainous presence of Arthur's Seat beyond, and you have the most extraordinary stroll in any European capital in terms of natural wilderness so close to the heart of a city. Back at the newly refurbished hotel, it's as if the spa has been dropped in from a desert resort, with a generous lap pool surrounded by hydrotherapy facilities. Bordered on all sides by glass walls and high-ceilinged, it is filled with light and more of a centrepiece than an afterthought. The bar, as is the current vogue, is long and open;

take a seat in one of the pods by the plate-glass window, take on the extensive tapas menu, and watch the city ancient (the castle) and modern (people hurrying to their evening engagements in the square outside) get on with its day.

Edinburgh has many five-star hotels, but for the moment, this is our favourite. Book your room soon for August's Festival. ♦♦

Written by Millie Walton and Darius Sanai

7132.com; hotelcasasanagustin.com; sheratonedinburgh.co.uk



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