



# The grand plan to revive the golden age of the luxury hotel

For nearly 100 years, the Grand Hotel Astoria was *the* destination in Brussels, frequented by dignitaries and celebrities. But it closed in 2007 with a plan for restoration. In November 2024, after 17 years in vacant disrepair, it is set to reopen as the Corinthia Grand Hotel Astoria Brussels. **Angela Dansby** reports on what the new owners promise is the most luxurious hotel in the city

**B**oasting a magnificent stained-glass ceiling over its courtyard, a glorious neo-classical façade and rooms dripping in luxury, the Corinthia Grand Hotel Astoria Brussels could be a throwback to the grandeur and glamour of the Belle Époque.

Which it was. For more than a century, as the Grand Hotel Astoria, it was the hotel of choice for the likes of Winston Churchill, Emperor Hirohito, James Joyce and Salvador Dalí.

Now being meticulously restored, renovated and expanded, the opulent hotel has been updated with the latest structural and functional technologies. It's one of only a handful of five-star superior hotels in Belgium but its new owners say it deserves more. "It's already referred to as a palace hotel, but in Belgium, we don't quite have that classification yet," says Managing Director Edward Leenders.

The Corinthia has 126 unusually large rooms, including 90 standard rooms 30 square metres each and 36 suites – five of which are "signature suites" of up to 330 square metres. The latter top-floor penthouses are lavish, each with a private gym, treatment room and extensive terraces with panoramic views. The hotel also has two Michelin-starred chefs, a gastronomic restaurant, Belgian brasserie, tearoom, cocktail bar, swimming pool, spa, wellness centre and retail spaces.

Fit for royalty – a standard room is €700 and penthouses up to €21,000 per night – the Corinthia is aptly located on Rue Royale. "The hotel chain aims to attract a new kind of clientele to Brussels, an audience not yet served in Europe's capital," Leenders says. "You can apply gold and make something look very fancy, but where we're going to make a difference is how we feel and how we're going to make people feel."

To this end, he wants the ultra-luxury hotel to be accessible and relaxed. "Our expectations have changed. We no longer want to be called 'Sir and Madam', with somebody running behind us,

opening the door of the toilet. We would like to be human again," he says.

The hotel is owned by Corinthia Hotels group, a global luxury brand with properties, largely heritage buildings, in 10 destinations. But staff say that they want to attract locals. "We don't want to be one of those stiff luxury hotels," notes Sophie Clarke, director of sales and marketing. "We've all been there, right, where we're too nervous to go through the doors because maybe we don't have a reservation and everyone stares at you. This is absolutely not what we're going to be. We want everybody to feel welcome."

The Corinthia also wants to make the most of home-grown expertise, especially when it comes to cuisine. "The joy of having partners locally is that they will be regularly in our kitchens," Clarke says. "Often in luxury hotels or elsewhere, Michelin star chefs sign menus and then you never see them again."

## Events and services

With a staff of about 250 – including some who previously worked at the Astoria – the Corinthia has the manpower to stage elaborate events: its main space, Salon Elisabeth, has 80 to 100 seats for events like candlelight concerts and gala dinners. "It's really a place for celebration. Like back in the days when women used to come down the grand staircase in their beautiful dresses, I'm sure that this space will encourage people to get dressed up and go out for a special evening as well," Clarke says.

From 1975 to 2007, the Astoria held chamber music concerts every Sunday morning, including by the annual winners of the Queen Elisabeth Competition. The Corinthia aims to resurrect this tradition as well as host events in connection with its featured Belgian brands. It also has two Steinway pianos on the ground floor as the Astoria once did.

The Corinthia hopes its service and opulence

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with make it stand out from the city’s other top hotels. Even the other five-star hotels – Juliana, Amigo and Steigenberger Wiltcher’s – are about half starting price of the Corinthia, which is also in a neighbourhood apart from the other top hotels downtown and on Avenue Louise.

Originally called the Astoria Bristol and later renamed Hotel Astoria, it was built for the Brussels International Exposition of 1910 at the request of King Leopold II, who sought a place to welcome fellow kings as well as queens, princes and emperors. The hotel’s Rue Royale location was key: just 500 metres from the Belgian parliament and amid chic stores like luxury jewellers.

The Hotel Astoria itself replaced the former Hotel Mengelle owned by the Goossens Bara family. It was designed by Henri Van Dievoet, nephew of architect Joseph Poelaert, in a mixed Beaux-Arts style with a neoclassical façade and majestic interior. The Astoria was one of three famed hotels in Brussels during the Belle Époque along with the Grand Hotel on Boulevard Ansapach (torn down long ago) and Hotel Métropole on Place de Brouckère (slated for renovation).

Since 2000, the property has been listed as a protected monument in the Brussels-Capital Region. Facing mounting restoration and renovation costs, it closed in 2007 and was then sold to Global Hotels & Resorts, owned by Saudi Arabian Sheikh Mohamed Youssef El-Khereji.

The sheikh made a commitment to Belgian

Prince – now King – Philippe to restore the hotel to its former glory, and Belgian architect Francis Metzger, who specialises in restoring heritage buildings, was tapped for the job. “I was going to this hotel regularly, having a drink in its bar like a lot of Brussels people,” Metzger says. “Then one day, I got a phone call from Sheikh Mohamed’s team to become the architect of this operation.”

The project not only included the historic hotel but also five buildings around it that the Goossens Bara family had bought when they sold Hotel Mengelle. “We had to create something coherent out of elements that had different heights, floors which didn’t match up, etc,” Metzger says. The hotel had been tweaked at various times between 1910 and 2007 but had lost some of its lustre over time. “We had to preserve what made the work and at the same time, bring it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a quality that people who can afford these hotels demand today,” he says.

The first phase of work began in 2010 and involved demolitions and cleaning, including the removal of asbestos and pollution. “We removed all the partitions and all the electricity that had been added over time so that we could carry out a sound analysis of the building and estimate the cost of the work,” Metzger says.

With costs soaring, Sheikh Mohammed sought to offload it and found a buyer in 2016: Corinthia Hotels. The group agreed to



Left: The hotel today. Right: And in the 1920s

## Food and drink

The Corinthia will offer five culinary establishments:

**Palais Royale:** The hotel’s flagship restaurant featuring French-Japanese fusion cuisine by double Michelin-starred chef David Martin of La Paix in Brussels

**Le Petit Bon Bon:** An upscale Belgian brasserie with an open kitchen by chef Christophe Hardiquet, the former owner of two-Michelin-star restaurant Bon Bon and currently at Menssa in Brussels

**Under the Stairs:** A high-end cocktail bar by mixologist Hannah Van Ongevalle of The Pharmacy in Knokke, featuring inventive drinks in a cosy atmosphere

**Palm Court:** A large courtyard serving morning coffee, afternoon tea and pre-dinner aperitifs under a stunning, 11-metre-high stained-glass ceiling

**Josephine’s Café:** A modern tearoom in the spa for conscious eating

Belgian artisans and artists are featured as much as possible, from a scent created for the hotel to several artworks and brands. Near the hotel entrance is a luxury concept store featuring around 10 high-end Belgian brands not previously represented in Brussels. The shop, spa and Le Petit Bon Bon have entrances outside the hotel on Rue Royale to encourage local patrons.



Left: The original stained glass upper hallway. Right: CGI rendering of the main lobby with the restored glass ceiling

the Belgian and Brussels government plans to restore the original stained-glass roof, so the project moved ahead more quickly, with the facelift estimated to cost at least €60 million.

## Architectural feats

Metzger says the main architectural challenge lay in combining restoration, renovation and new construction. It began with research in three sectors: the hotel's history, archaeology and pathology.

The historical research involved examining documents on how the hotel was built and "lost its identity" over time. "Our effort is about reclaiming the identity of a vanished work and at the same time, bringing that work into line with the needs of today's society in terms of electricity, plumbing, heating and insulation technologies," Metzger says.

Metzger likens the archaeological research to a detective arriving at a crime scene. One technology used was stratigraphy, which removes layer upon layer of paint on walls with blades to see their original colours. The hotel's classified rooms have different paint colours as a result.

Finally, the pathological study looked at the building's 'diseases' or faults, like leaks and cracks. "It's like a medical study in that we scan the building and try to determine which diseases are present," Metzger says. "After diagnosis, we set up a remedial campaign, with specifications and technical proposals."

The elements that could be dismantled were restored in a workshop and the rest on site like the stained-glass ceiling and crown mouldings. The ceiling was the first major element restored to close off precipitation and enable continuous work underneath. The original design was shaped like a rectangle with sloping sides, but it was replaced in 1947 and 2000 by flat and coloured glass ceilings, respectively.

"It was difficult to make the cupola watertight with the means available in 1910," Metzger says. "The Goossens Bara family told me about the bucket they had to put underneath it because the water was coming through. Today, of course, technology has enabled us to redo this canopy as watertight, decorative and easy to maintain."

Restoring the ceiling was particularly challenging as the architectural drawings had been lost, so Metzger's team could only rely on period black and white photos. They used descriptive geometry to understand the scale of the glass roof in three dimensions via a digital video footprint. "We put this historical glass panel back in place on the basis of a hypothesis," Metzger says.

Elsewhere, a golden A for Astoria remains above the entrance as a nod to the hotel's storied past. Gold leafing has been restored on the exterior with meticulous craftsmanship.

All listed walls like the façade are original but anything inside had to come out and be re-done without damaging the walls. "It's obviously difficult to fit all of today's technology into a hotel that wasn't designed for it," Metzger says. The construction team of around 300 well protected the listed areas, which were suspended on stilts and cables, even when digging 14 meters below the property to create a new floor for the spa. They also added two new floors on top, mainly for signature suites.

"All the projects we work on are contemporary, but they're meant to be respectful of an architectural moment that was produced by previous architects," Metzger says. "It's like having a conversation with someone who's no longer here. And it's a respectful conversation in the sense that you understand what he wanted to do."

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