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Fearless Design

Alexandra Champalimaud mixes majestic with modern to bring Singapore's iconic Raffles hotel into the future

By Sahar Khan • Photography by Annie Tritt

The lobby at Raffles Singapore



Interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud calls herself “a social anthropologist.” Before she begins a project, the designer, who has revitalized some of the world’s most renowned hotels, including The Carlyle in New York and the Fairmont San Francisco, immerses herself in the building’s history. “What are the stories about the people who go there?” she asks. “Why do they go there? Why is it so special from the one next door?”

After four decades in the business, it’s precisely this philosophy that keeps her one of the most sought-after interior designers in the world. “There’s a passion within Alexandra that cannot be matched—it’s contagious,” says Jon Kastl, a partner at her New York-based firm, Champalimaud Design, where a team of 50 people works on hotels, restaurants, residences, and a line of bespoke furnishings. “She has a remarkable ability to push all of us to

think bigger and go further with our creative ideas.”

Champalimaud applied this outlook to her latest “dream project,” Raffles Singapore, which reopened in August after having been completely shut down for two years. The 132-year-old neo-Renaissance icon now has a polished look, but it’s one that hews to its original glory. Built in 1887 as the first grande dame hotel in the East, Raffles became the social center for elites in Singapore



and the surrounding British territories. Champalimaud's goal for Raffles—to bring back the *joie de vivre* of its early years—crystallized when she looked at photos of hotel dances from the Roaring '20s. "I saw these wild parties, and it made me smile," she says. "Because ultimately that's what you want: for people to have a great time in a space like that."

The danger when renovating a legacy property is drowning it in nostalgia. Champalimaud's team worked with the National Heritage Board to honor the hotel's colonial past while updating it for the modern era. Take the legendary Long Bar, where barkeep Ngiam Tong Boon invented the Singapore Sling in 1915. The designer balanced the original plantation-style bar and palm-shaped ceiling fans (the first in the region) with new black-and-white rattan chairs and marble-topped tables. Across the hotel's 115 suites, meanwhile, four-poster beds with carved headboards hark back to Raffles's original designs. "We're not changing [the hotel] radically at all," Champalimaud says. "We're just improving it and giving it a new lease on life."

Raffles isn't the first historic property Champalimaud has freshened up. Case in point: the 18th-century Monkey Island Estate, a newly minted boutique hotel that was once the 3rd Duke of Marlborough's fishing lodge on the River Thames. The resort's name is inspired in part by the *singerie* murals (a satirical genre depicting monkeys in human finery) that French artist Andieu de Clermont painted here sometime around the 1730s, and as a tribute, Champalimaud upholstered the Monkey Bar

with crimson and navy fabrics inspired by the primates' knee-length coats.

In some ways, Champalimaud owes the beginnings of her career to the shifting winds of history. She grew up outside of Lisbon, in a stately home overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, and in 1971, at 19, married a scion of one of Portugal's most powerful industrialist families, the Champalimauds. She was only 22 in 1974, when, in the early days of the Carnation Revolution, the country's interim prime minister called and advised her family to leave immediately to avoid becoming a target. With their toddler son in tow, the young couple fled. "It was terrifying," Champalimaud says. "[But] I never thought it would be permanent."

Champalimaud found herself in Montreal, starting from scratch; soon, her marriage dissolved as well. She had dabbled in design work while in Portugal, so she cold-called firms in the Yellow Pages. Her first hotel renovation was a property "that was somewhat of a brothel" in central Montreal; she transformed it into upscale lodgings. Soon she had commissions around the world: China, South Africa, Italy, and India. Champalimaud credits much of her success to her

international experience, which taught her "how to respect other cultures, how to learn about other cultures, and how to be a person of the world."

No matter where in the world a Champalimaud project is—the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, the Four Seasons in Jakarta, now Raffles in Singapore—they all share an intimate majesty, a sense of something extra but not unnecessary. "You can't take me for granted," Champalimaud says of her aesthetic. "I know how to be very dramatic. I know how to be very intuitive and personal. And I'm fearless."

That fearlessness has come to be another defining characteristic, both in Champalimaud's designs and in her life. When she was working on a hotel in Kashmir, Champalimaud says the ongoing military conflict didn't bother her—after all, in addition to her experience in Portugal, she'd spent time in war-torn Mozambique in the early '70s during her first husband's military service. What *did* affect her was when the client asked to add a crystal chandelier to a property with rustic mountain decor. "That's what can kill me, and not much else," she says with mock horror. "A chandelier in the wrong place."



Monkey Island Estate's Monkey Bar; above: BBR by Alain Ducasse, at Raffles Singapore