



Garden View

Amy Fabris-Shi uncovers the chic courtyard surroundings of the Hotel Côté Cour SL

I sucked in my breath as the taxi squeezed further along the tiny hutong, which was becoming increasingly narrow and tumbledown. "Where are we going?" the taxi driver asked. "A new boutique hotel," I replied meekly as he flashed me an incredulous look in the rearview mirror. I was as unsure as he was, but there was no turning back now.

Eventually, a huge lipstick-red door set into a grey brick wall announced our arrival at Hotel Côté Cour SL, as a cheongsam-clad bell boy appeared through it on cue. Leaving the driver to navigate his way past old women sunning on cane chairs and tricycles stacked with toilet rolls, I stepped into the sunny courtyard and immediately banished all thoughts of the outside world.

Ming dynasty meets *Vogue Living* at this 500-year-old hutong residence, recently transformed into a 14-room boutique hotel. The fabulously chic owner, Shauna Liu, spent eight years as an investment banker in Hong Kong before returning to her hometown of Beijing. Despite her obvious shrewdness with numbers, Liu also has an artistic streak: she dabbles in painting and design, speaks French, and studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. Her own penthouse apartment is filled with

works by contemporary artist friends, and throughout her days in finance, she always secretly dreamed of playing host at her own little *pensione*.

When a family friend mentioned that a hutong had come on the market in a protected area of Old Beijing last year, she decided to visit on a whim. It was utterly decrepit but was of a decent size, and had a magical feel. The venture capitalist within Shauna quickly tallied the figures, and rolled her eyes at the financial folly of a small hotel. But it was the bohemian Shauna who bought the property, and promptly disappeared for six months as she set about realizing her dream – a lengthy learning process that had her studying ancient plumbing and getting her hands dirty planting wisteria and grape vines in the garden.

"I didn't tell my friends because I knew they would try to talk me out of it," says Liu. "I have 14 rooms and 15 full-time staff. People with an investment background just wouldn't do this. I'm doing it totally out of passion."

Côté cour is French for "garden view." It's also the traditional name of the royal (or VIP) box at French theaters, a fitting theatrical allusion considering Yanyue Hutong, where the hotel

is situated, was the rehearsal and living quarters of actors and dancers of the emperor's court during the Ming dynasty.

The 14 rooms of different configurations range around a central courtyard, connected by intricately painted corridors (which took 30 local artisans 45 days to complete). But it's not all traditional. The ancient Chinese canvas is offset with plenty of quirky flourishes creating a delightfully cheery and livable space. A candy-pink garden bench sits opposite a 200-year-old date tree, while sun umbrellas colored emperor yellow are dotted around a goldfish pond (filled with some very frisky fish, one might add). The whole place is wired and unbelievably quiet – you'd never guess you were in the heart of downtown Beijing.

Everywhere you turn you notice how the creator of this cozy hideaway has an eye for detail and style. The traditionally dark rooms are brightened with olive walls and emerald mosaic bathrooms, tall beds are made with fine linen and handmade Chinese silk, and TVs are of the flat screen variety – with an impressively wide selection of international channels. You know you're feeling right at home with courtyard life

when you keep forgetting to close (let alone lock) your door as you wander around the residence, or you chat with the proprietor through open windows while reclining on your bed.

Breakfast is taken in the lounge, a whimsical space strewn with silk-cushioned armchairs, a giant birdcage, and a room-length mural by daring contemporary artist Chi Peng. Morning sunlight streams through six-meter glass panes as you tuck into organic muesli and yogurt, fresh-baked scones, tropical fruits and strong coffee – brewed from the gleaming espresso machine that sits on a lime sideboard.

It's only a short walk from the hotel to the Chaoyangmen- nei Nanxiaojie end of the hutong (I'd arrived via the distant Dongsì Nandajie entrance), and a ten minute taxi ride to the historic center of the capital. Though with its own host of hutong features, imposing red doors, and colorful personalities, you may decide to just stay put in Hotel Côté Cour SL, and soak up Beijing life from one of the city's loveliest old courtyards. ■

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