



It's SO/ Auckland

Briar Jensen checks into SO/ Auckland and discovers a contemporary hotel infused with quintessential Kiwi style.

It's difficult to define Kiwi cool – that edgy, sophisticated and a tad offbeat sense of style that translates to seriously hip, often delivered in a slightly cheeky, but genuinely sincere way. Step inside the SO/ Auckland and you'll understand.

Buttoned-leather sofas stand upended as a seat for one; a bouquet-explosion of lamps reinterprets a chandelier; plush couches and ottomans flaunt sexy fringed hems; circular sculptures are actually futuristic rocking chairs. It's all reflected in bevelled mirror tiles and black marble, evocative of a seductive nightclub. And this is just the lobby-cum-MIXO Bar. Here, luxury comes with a side of personality.

From the moment the spiffily dressed Neil Hemraj, the Just Say So Manager (guest relations manager), whisks me from the airport in a gold Bentley, I know I'm going to love this hotel.

SO/ Auckland opened in November 2018 in the Britomart waterfront district, itself undergoing transformation from seedy to salubrious. It's one of seven SO/ hotels worldwide, each styled by a renowned designer; in Auckland, that's avant-

garde fashion house WORLD, resulting in a quintessential Kiwi design that's simultaneously bold and edgy, retro and urbane.

Bespoke experiences are the hotel's speciality and nothing is too much trouble for Hemraj, from a handmade chocolate shoe in my room on arrival to organising a sabrage lesson at sister property Sofitel, where I thrillingly sabre the top off a bottle of Perrier-Jouët Champagne.

Equally special is a private viewing of the America's Cup at the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron with the Vice Commodore, before stepping aboard a private motorboat for a champagne transfer to Waiheke Island.

We also spend a morning with WORLD's designer Benny Castles, who shows us around Britomart before a perfume masterclass that is sensuously stimulating.

Castles has drawn on Auckland's volcanic history for room themes of vapour, liquid and solid, and the hotel's emblem, a hypnotic stylised swirl depicting the eye of a volcano, which appears on ties and cushions, wall art and wallpaper.



He references the building's history as a gold store and Reserve Bank with gold-washed bathroom tiles, gold hand basins and shimmering sheer curtains. There are frivolous touches, too, with neon in the stylish HI-SO rooftop bar and pulsating down the outside of the building at night.

Harbour Society, the 15th-floor restaurant, overlooks Waitematā Harbour and Rangitoto Island's volcanic peak. Here, French chef Marc de Passorio has given his signature dish of lobster poached in vodka a Kiwi makeover, pairing crayfish with local Scapegrace Goldilocks Gin for a visual and taste sensation.

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