

ANNUS LUXURIOUS

There's nothing like the luxury of hindsight — unless it's the luxury of looking forward to even more luxury in the future. John Arlidge reviews the best of 2011 and the prospects for 2012

Another year over. Another chance to play Ultra Heroes. Who did the most to create luxe that killed in 2011? After years dominated by chic resort retreats — ‘Aman this, Six Senses that’ — this was the year when the urban hotel ruled. Two in particular stand out. If the mark of a good hotel is to be like no other, then the St Pancras Hotel must be the best in the world. Walking in, you know you've never been anywhere like it and probably never will. It's a masterpiece of High Victorian, neo-Gothic extravagance. Every room, every staircase is different, and each has a story to tell. Harry Handelsman, the property developer who saved the building from ruin, should be awarded hotelier of the year award, even though he's not a hotelier.

It's a short, elegant train journey by Eurostar to the other stand-out luxury hotel of the year: the Shangri-La in Paris. Arriving at what was the 19th-century home of Napoleon Bonaparte's grand-nephew, Prince Roland, in the sixteenth arrondissement, you feel impossibly grand. The Prince's private apartment makes the Art Deco suites at Claridge's look like wigwams. But the best thing about this hotel is the opposite of grand. It's *le pique-nique*. The upper-floor rooms have roof terraces with uninterrupted views of the Eiffel Tower and *le tout Paris*. You can walk to Hédiard, pick up some cheese, ham, baguette and wine and have the finest picnic, perhaps the most memorable French meal, of *le weekend*.

Despite iffy snow, ski operators continued to get better in 2011. The Ultra Award for the best goes to CK Verbier, run by London-based Liz and Charlie Berman. What makes CK very special is its service. One example. The Range Rover was five minutes late to pick me up at the local railway station to take me to the chalet, but when I arrived there was a handwritten note of apology — attached to a bottle of Krug. I rather hope they're late again next time.

Up in the air, it has been another tough year for those who endure the torture rack of business travel, but there are some bright spots. Emirates continues to grow, offering its brand-new aircraft, great service and good food on more and more routes. In December Dubai airport becomes the second busiest international airport in the world — it's forecast to overtake Heathrow by 2015.

Among the legacy carriers, Singapore continues to set standards. Virgin Atlantic is revamping all its cabins and buying new aircraft. Lufthansa has introduced an excellent first-class product which gets around the age-old problem of

designing a seat that works for day flights but also turns into a comfortable bed for night flights — by giving up on the whole idea. Now you get a bed and, next to it, a seat. Brilliant.

British Airways' new 'Aviators' advertisements remind us all of why we love(d) the red, white and blue tail fin. And BA has, at last, some great new kit in the air to match the excellent T5 at Heathrow. The new first-class ensures privacy and



comfort, without boxing us up in so-called 'suites', and the new premium economy offers more leg room, thinner but more comfortable seats that recline more and food you might actually want to eat. BA's 'Open Day' at Heathrow was brilliantly innovative branding — and great fun.

When it comes to private air travel, our victor is Clive Jackson. The London-based digital marketing entrepreneur used to fly on BMI to his holiday home in Mallorca until BMI cut the route. On the last few flights, he asked fellow passengers whether they'd be interested in sharing a private jet in future, rather than enduring EasyJet. They were. So he founded Victor.

It's a private jet-share 'community' that offers individuals a price comparison, booking and payment platform to charter private jets on any route at any time. Unlike services such as NetJets, there's no joining or membership fee — you pay for what you use. Victor already has 160 aircraft on its books and almost 500 members.

And here are the best of the rest. Artisan of the year is Tomasz Nosarzewski. Every Thursday he swaps his workshop in East London for Alfred Dunhill's Bourdon House, where he designs bespoke leather wallets, bags, watch straps, luggage — you name it — to customers' exact specifications. He and his products are unique. Best arty fella of the year is Michael Govan of the Los Angeles

County Museum of Modern Art (LACMA). He's the driving force behind Pacific Standard Time, the first time all the major galleries in a single city anywhere have come together to showcase a city's art. It runs until April 2012.

Best barber and general stylish fella about London is Carmelo Guastella. His men's salon in St Pancras station, Melody, offers the best haircut, wet shave and view in the capital. Best property club of the year? Hideaways has continued adding new properties and members and its booking system gives members what they want most of the time.

So much for 2011. What do Ultra readers have to look forward to next year? My pick is to keep an even closer eye on Mayfair, where a clutch of new private members' clubs is due to open. First up will be 5 Hertford St, established by Robin Birley, son of Mark Birley, founder of the Annabel's Group, who disinherited his son and sold the group to rag-trade multimillionaire Richard Caring in 2007 for £100 million. Robin may have lost his birthright, but has he inherited his father's magic touch for clubs?

The opening of 50 St James's Street is also eagerly anticipated. It's the brainchild of Luca del Bono, co-founder of concierge outfit Quintessentially and chic Knightsbridge restaurant-cum-club Mari Vanna, who is backed by Russian investors. The rooftop terrace will be the place to be and be seen in 2012. Now's the time to start angling for membership. *J*

Above left: The neo-Gothic St Pancras Hotel. *Far left:* Sharp-cut barber supreme Carmelo Guastella. *Near left:* Luca del Bono of 50 St James's Street. *Above:* Alpine luxury created by CK Verbier. *Above right:* BA's premium perch