

André Balazs is a man with presence. Whether he's driving between his new real estate developments in Lower Manhattan, arriving at a New York fashion week party by Vespa in an immaculate suit, crash helmet and loafers (sans socks), or merely holding court at his offices in SoHo's landmark Puck building, he has a certain aura that has established his name as both a brand and a lifestyle.

Being Balazs

The Balazs signature on a hotel project really says something. People check in to a Balazs property because they feel simpatico with the Balazs lifestyle. People want to be like André, to be able to show that everything they do is an effortless success and more than that, fun.

'I gave up differentiating between work and leisure a long time ago,' Balazs says, from behind a meticulously-ordered desk, surrounded by art and design books. 'Before I came to this, when I was in business, I would work all week and be exhausted. Now there is no difference between work and play. I'm always working, whether I'm here or in my 1670s Shaker farmhouse on Shelter Island, Long Island where I go to fish and have friends out for the weekend, but it's not work.'

A LIFE OF

André Balazs is the Manhattan hotelier behind some of the most vaunted hotels in the US – from New York's Mercer to the Chateau Marmont in LA. Mark C.O'Flaherty meets the SoHo sophisticate and astute trend setter.

style

'I'M LIKE THE PRODUCER FROM THE OLD STUDIO DAYS, BRINGING IN ALL THE RIGHT PEOPLE.'



The Mercer, New York

On weekends, Balazs heads out of SoHo, where he has lived in various lofts for 23 years, to his retreat on Shelter Island. "Living downtown between two rivers, it is particularly easy to escape Manhattan by seaplane," he says. "A good time to do this is after lunch at Provence with an architect or designer whose work I'd like to get to know." Once out by the ocean, Balazs goes out of his way to be on water every day. "I'll call around my island friends and see who's up for a little water skiing," he tells me. "The usual suspects are shaken and stirred with a few hapless house guests for a spirited outing." Other times Balazs will sail on his own. "There are few things as bracing as setting out into a stiff breeze on my catamaran."

Production values

On land, Balazs the American hotelier is equally enterprising, a characteristic he shares with the likes of Jason Pomeranc (of the Thomson group) and Ian Schrager. Where Balazs differs is that he has created very different kinds of properties within his portfolio. All have a sense of modernity, energy and, of course, that aforementioned fun. 'I see this business as like filmmaking,' explains Balazs. 'It needs a complete cast of characters. Someone has to develop a story, hire a director and put together the production design. Each role is creative and each is important.' And in what position does Balazs see himself? 'I'm like the producer from the old studio days, bringing in all the right people,' he says.

Backstory

Balazs came to hotels after leaving the biotech industry (in which he co-founded a hugely successful company) and worked for a period as a journalist. As a child he wanted to be a sculptor, but claims he found the medium frustrating as very few people understood it. From sculpting, then journalism, to his hotelier-as-auteur career, it is 'the story' that he is focused on; a feeling for coherence as much as style.

Right now Balazs is developing 'the story' behind his fourth Standard property. The 330-room New York hotel will open at the end of 2008,

Balazs in his SoHo office



straddling the High Line railway close to the Meatpacking District, and join the Miami Standard and two Los Angeles outposts. 'I have in the back of my mind what the narrative is for the new Standard,' he affirms. 'But doing this is like being a father, you can have a vision of the future but its personality will develop organically. We will have to react to it. We will fine tune it.'

Character driven

Each of his hotels has a different story to tell: 'Take the three existing Standards,' Balazs says. 'Each has a different personality linked to the neighbourhood it is in and each was conceived differently. Hollywood is very present in the Hollywood Standard, while the Miami one is a spa and a retreat and a place to get away.' The common denominator with the Standard properties is an appreciation of the language of nightlife. Tellingly, Balazs hired Shaun Haussman, the man who created the legendary Area nightclub in New York in the 80s, to help create the Standard's style.

Each hotel in the Balazs group is unique: The Chateau Marmont is a historic Los Angeles celebrity enclave; the Raleigh in Miami is a deco fantasy; QT is a swish budget B&B amidst the neon of Times Square with a tiny, much-talked-about swimming pool in the lobby bar; the Mercer in SoHo is a collection of loft-style rooms beloved of the fashion community and Sunset Beach on Long Island is a romantic retro-tinged escape. A love of architecture and contemporary design is apparent in each hotel and Balazs clearly knows his stuff. He's a patron as much as an enthusiast.

Art direction

One of his projects involves finding a home for Maison Tropicale, one of the three 1951 ultra modernist flat-packed eco-structures that Jean Prouve designed in the Congo. Balazs bought Maison Tropicale at auction, for nearly \$5 million, and displayed it in front of London's Tate Modern during the winter. Its next stop is the Raleigh Hotel in Miami for Art Basel, but Balazs

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is looking for a new permanent home. 'It was designed as environmentally, low-impact housing for the tropics, so we are looking to locate it within that spirit,' he explains, having just returned from a trip to Panama City to look at potential sites. There is talk of developing a similarly eco-oriented resort around the Prouve building once a site is settled upon.

Strategic development

Balazs' business is accelerating fast, though he says he doesn't want it to get to an unmanageable size. Last year the group refinanced some of its hotels to take advantage of the capital markets. There is now mention of, as yet unconfirmed, hotel projects in Europe and Central America and his name has been linked with redevelopment plans for the historic Chelsea Hotel in New York City.

His recently-completely Jean Nouvel-designed 40 Mercer apartment building project in SoHo sold out and there is strong interest in his other residential development in New York City, the still-under-construction

'A place to get away,' The Standard, Miami.



William Beaver House. 'Wherever the business ends up, we will continue to do projects that are deeply meaningful,' stresses Balazs. 'They have to resonate with us and we hope they resonate with a certain kind of clientele – sophisticated, very cultured and certain of who they are, whether that be an expensive luxury product or something more affordable.'

The through line

Balazs is scathing about the attempts of corporate hotel chains to adopt the vocabulary of his work, seeing it as a cynical and hollow attempt to jump on the boutique hotel bandwagon. 'While I was in Panama City the hotel I was in had elements of every boutique hotel from the last ten years,' Balazs says. 'But it was still obviously a chain hotel.'

Balazs has, if anything, defined himself by others' failures: 'One thing I have learnt over the years is the importance of the creation of the culture of a hotel. The absence of that culture has become noticeable to the travelling public. The people creating hotels have mistaken interior decoration for



The luxurious pool at The Raleigh.

an indication of the coolness of a hotel and I've learnt that it's nothing to do with looks. The culture is to do with the management of people.' For Balazs, it was Starwood's creation of the W brand that signalled a sea change: 'There was a wholesale mania for interior decoration being applied to hotels that really were nothing unique. The W hotel brand was being promoted as something fresh and new, and that was when I realised there was a complete misunderstanding of what actually constituted design.'

Visual balance

André Balazs has been able to manipulate the media and the American celebrity circus to his own advantage, even in a high-profile relationship with the actress Uma Thurman. While Jason Pomeranc is fairly invisible, and Ian Schrager has been cautious of the press since his Studio 54 days, Balazs has embroidered all of the strengths of his brand without becoming overexposed.

Auteur

When he appeared on the cover of *Fantastic Man* in 2007, it signalled exactly where he was and what his agenda is. Instead of courting a Clooney or a Gyllenhaal for its covers, the magazine only features men on its cover, who are at the very forefront of credibility, such as photographer Vinoodh Matadin or fashion designers Giles Deacon, Stefano Pilati or Helmut Lang.

By appearing on the cover of *Fantastic Man*, Balazs' stock as a style icon rocketed in all the right circles. He continues to assert, 'I'm not a celebrity,' and of course he's not a household name like Hilton, nor would he want to be. The André Balazs empire isn't that kind of business. Though he had appeared on the cover of New York magazine, *Fantastic Man* placed him firmly within the inner circle of the most influential people of the tastemaking industry today. Which is where, aura, suit, crash helmet and all, he looks set to stay for some considerable time. ■

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