



The Kengo Kuma-designed rooms are light, modern and delightfully spacious.



Asian fusion restaurant Bei is receiving raves from Beijing foodies.

JUST

The Opposite House does away with check-in desks and traditional luxury to attract a glamorous crowd of hipsters with its contemporary chic. Could this be a coming of age for Beijing? **Phin Foster** reports.

# CAPITAL

The emergence of China as a global superpower is old news now and Beijing has long been acknowledged as an essential stop on the international jetsetter's itinerary. However, as a destination in its own right the city has long lived in the shadow of its glitzier, more cosmopolitan sister, Shanghai.

Those looking for high-end, destination hotels are forced to fall back on the old stalwarts: the Four Seasons, Grand Hyatts and Hiltons synonymous with every large city across the globe. This traditional, dare one say Western, concept of five-star will always please the American businessman on a short stopover before catching the red-eye, but the lack of variety is indicative of a scene still struggling to forge its own identity and consistently failing to excite the hipper, trendsetting demographic that demands a sense of place, adventure and personality from any home away from home.

The first signs of a shift in focus came with the 2008 opening of the 55-room Emperor, a Design Hotel housed in a former student dormitory overlooking the Forbidden City. Indeed, so different was this project to anything else going on in the Chinese capital that its founder failed to find a suitable general manager in mainland China and was forced to step into the breach himself.

## Emperor's new clothes

If the Emperor symbolised the first steps of a nascent boutique scene, the Opposite House – a Kengo Kuma designed, emerald green glass-clad lifestyle hotel in the bustling district of Sanlitun – feels more like a coming of age.

In a city that can be unrelenting, claustrophobic and crowded, the abundance of space and natural light throughout the 99-room property is a luxury that the multinational monoliths lining the city's five ring roads could never replicate. This is new Beijing; self-confident, ambitious, hip and unapologetically other.

It may provide a place of refuge from the city outside but, unlike its competitors, the Opposite House is also utterly plugged into the surrounding area. The centrepiece of the newly developed Village at Suniltun, its six-story central atrium is more akin to a fashionista nerve centre than a hotel lobby. The concept of the check-in desk has been done away with entirely and a series of glamorously attired hipsters, businessmen and media-types flow through its doors, greeting friends, tapping away on laptops and admiring the impressive selection of contemporary Chinese art on display. The overall dynamic is not dissimilar to the coolest of destination multi-purpose spaces in New York's meat packing district or London's Shoreditch.

## AROUND TOWN

Where to eat: The Courtyard's East-West fusion menu, impressive art collection and arguably Beijing's finest wine cellar make this exciting restaurant a must.

[www.courtyardbeijing.com](http://www.courtyardbeijing.com)

Where to drink: Chocolate, a lavish new club targeting the city's Russian residents, has been described as 'a cross between Roman Abramovich's bedroom and the set of a Persian hip-hop video'.

[www.club-chocolate.ru](http://www.club-chocolate.ru)

Where to shop: The Chinese contemporary art scene is currently the most collectable on the planet. The vast former factory complex of 798 is its epicenter, highlighting the best of the country's ambitious young artists.

[www.798art.org](http://www.798art.org)

The stainless steel basement pool offers respite from the city outside.

has set and the city's night owls venture out. The two basement restaurants, Sureno, a Mediterranean eatery complete with wood-fired oven, and the ambitious purveyor of pan-Asian fusion cuisine, Bei, are already attracting raves from Beijing foodies, but the most striking slice of Beijing life can be found in the fashion-magnet cocktail bar, Mesh, and hotel nightclub, Punk.

On my second evening, a Thursday, the venue was packed with revellers returning from a Kanye West concert – my how China has changed! – hotel guests and barflies. Each was indistinguishable from the other: the fundamental sign of a successful lifestyle brand in action and an early indication that the Opposite House is building a scene all of its own.

But this hotel is not the preserve of late night revellers. The rooms, including a two floor penthouse complete with roof terrace, offer splendid isolation from the action below and are an exercise in uncluttered contemporary chic. Artless walls, hardwood floors and open plan bathrooms

This is particularly true of the Opposite House once the sun

concealed behind a clear glass wall, each containing a giant deep soaking square wooden bathtub; it is all an exemplary showcase of Kuma's signature playful experimentation with the themes of transparency and juxtaposition.

And although this first offering from Swire Hotels tears up the rule book when it comes to luxury accommodation in the Chinese capital, some elements remain. A Maserati Quattroporte and an Audi Q7 are on hand to ferry guests the 30 minute drive to and from Beijing Airport and the high-design spa and stainless steel pool housed two floors below ground level offer ample opportunities for pampering.

As a word of warning for those more used to the Four Seasons experience, the (charming, but occasionally hapless) staff do appear to have been recruited through a modelling agency rather than the Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne, but for most that will add to the Opposite House's charm, character and confidence.

Post-Olympic China fatigue may have set in among trend spotters in the West, but, on the evidence of the Opposite House, Beijing is having far too much fun to care. ■

[theoppositehouse.com](http://theoppositehouse.com)