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Meet the man who brought Paris's Hotel Costes to Sloane Square

'You don't shout in a church – or in the Hôtel du Cap. It's like that with quiet luxury,' François-Joseph Graf tells Lisa Grainger



One Sloane comprises 30 guest rooms, a top-floor restaurant, a lobby lounge and a downstairs speakeasy bar
WILL PRICE

Lisa Grainger | Friday September 29 2023, 12.01am, The Times

Some brands make their fortunes by shouting about what they do from morning until night, until their products feel as commonplace as trees or buildings. Others grow by stealthily inveigling themselves into your lives. Then there are those that just keep quiet: brands that don't show off about what they do, and about which you only know if you're part of a select group.

François-Joseph Graf is not a name you'll spot in the Design Museum. And it's rare to find any domestic interior he has created in a magazine. That's because the twinkly eyed, besuited, silk-tied Parisian — whose frowning glance at my neon-bright sustainable bamboo trainers conveys everything I need to know about his sensibilities — doesn't need to shout about what he does. His clients are moneyed Europeans, impressed by his experience working at the Palace of Versailles. He is renowned in France as a serious art collector, with similar expertise in the world of antiques, able to add historical authenticity to any interior. And he's the man Earl Cadogan approached to help transform a block of red-brick mansion flats in Sloane Square into a hotel replete with old-style glamour.



The hotel is housed within a 19th-century mansion that had been divided into large apartments
WILL PROVES

Stepping inside One Sloane, there is no denying the serious capital that has gone into this project. To transform a 19th-century mansion block into a 21st-century hotel, with a new underground bar and sixth-floor restaurant, the earl took on the London architects ReardonSmith, totally gutting the building while maintaining the listed 1889 front by Edwin Thomas Hall (who designed the Liberty building). To create a destination that was both sexy and heavyweight — like the Portman estate did in Marylebone with Chiltern Firehouse — Cadogan utilised the skills of Jean-Louis Costes, the man still widely seen as having created the most fashionable hotel in Paris, Hôtel Costes. And for interiors with gravitas he turned to Graf. Together they've created a destination like nowhere else in London: a made-to-measure 30-bedroom boutique hotel with all the dark naughtiness of Hotel Costes, but the classical finishes and finesse of a grand, private art nouveau mansion.



The block of red-brick mansion flats in Sloane Square has been transformed into a hotel replete with old-style glamour
WILL FRYCE

Graf has cleverly divided the building into rooms of two distinct characters: one light, the other dark. Step from the grand vestibule into the living room-cum-reception and everything is dimly lit, sensuous and adorned with late-19th-century designs. Amid antiques and trompe l'oeil finishes, cloud-painted ceilings and leaded windows, lie grand fireplaces and monochrome mosaics, William Morris-designed chairs and elegant Benson lights.



The underground bar is lined in dark wooden panels and furnished in burgundy velvet
WILL FRYCE

The bar one floor down, connecting a warren of underground snugs lined in dark wooden panels and furnished in burgundy velvet, feels more sumptuous and sexy still — partly thanks to a series of black-and-white photographs featuring snogging women, male nudes and a leather-clad Françoise Hardy.



Graf has divided the building into rooms of two distinct characters — light and dark

WILL PRICE

Wander upstairs into the 30 bedrooms, though, and the atmosphere couldn't feel more different. Clad in off-white wooden panelling, with pretty art deco-style leaded windows (made by the same glass company in Chartres that made the city's cathedral windows) and floored in oak and pale mosaics, the bedrooms were created as an antidote to the hedonistic bar, Graf says, "to feel like you're in the clouds, surrounded by sunshine and air".

Not one room is the same as any other. Graf either designed or had made to order 21 different carpets (by Louis de Poorterre in Paris), 19 curtain designs (many made by Phelippeau, also in Paris) and 50 fabrics (many by Loro Piana): all in black, white, brown and burgundy, incorporating art deco designs. The lacquered William Morris-style desks were handmade in France. And each of the bathrooms is, he says, "a bit of an ode to Claridge's, which used to have the most beautiful bathrooms in the world" with huge porcelain baths, monochrome tiles and artfully lit chrome mirrors.



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WILL PRICE

The hotel's crowning glory is undoubtedly its newly created three-roomed, sixth-floor restaurant, with views over Chelsea's plane trees. Modelled on the Peacock Room designed in 1876 by James McNeill Whistler and Thomas Jeckyll (which was relocated to the Smithsonian in Washington), each of the spaces is clad in white-lacquered, Japonisme-style shelving, which Graf has filled with "500 or 600, I don't know," vases he personally sourced from Singapore: in one room white, another black, and the third burgundy. Sitting at the little round white-clothed tables, on dark, lacquered, art deco chairs, surrounded by a hundreds of elegant bits of porcelain, you feel transported back into another era, while enjoying modern Parisian dishes overseen by Jean-Louis Costes: perfectly cooked hake with lemon butter, green beans and French fries; slithers of raw sea bream anointed with fragrant olive oil and lime; rich pot au chocolat. All accompanied, of course, by very nice French wine.



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Graf says he is very happy with what is, after all, only his second hotel (his first, La Mirande in Avignon, was a classical Provençal-style guesthouse). But being, he admits, a "hotel junkie" who has been to every one of the Aman hotels, and in London lives in the Connaught, he understands what works for "more discreet, more discerning clients". His aim was to create the antithesis of the big international hotels opening around London: the "palace hotels that are full of chandeliers and crystal and marble, and people in jogging pants, shouting, who don't know how to act . . . The interiors that are all exactly the same in cities around the world."



"When you build something different and chic, people will behave differently," Graf says
WILL PRYCE

"I wanted to get rid of all the clichés," he says. "The silly music in each room; the mediocre architecture with the obligatory piece trying to be modern: like that King Kong by Orlinski, which you can now find everywhere. When you build something different and chic, people will behave differently. You used to see that in Brown's and Dukes [hotels] in the last century. You don't shout in a church — or in the Hôtel du Cap. It's like that with quiet luxury."

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And every single detail matters, he says. Hence the cream around plastic knobs on the door made to look like ivory "because that's what it would have been in the peak of the Empire"; the floors in corridors that he's had hand-painted to match the stair runners; the design of the air-conditioning vents that would have been used in the late 1800s. Plus some extra little naughty additions — like a "Love" button beside the bed to dim the lighting; the Costes-style playlist wafting through the corridors; the erotic Greek vases dotted about. "Details," he says, glancing over his glasses at my trainers, "make all the difference. You can cook well, but if you put too much salt you throw the whole dish away."

Details Doubles from £600 to £2,400, onesloane.co.uk