



Only You Inspired the Only YOU

By Judith Glynn

Top floor Barquillo Secret luxury room is accessed with a private spiral staircase



Newcomer luxury boutique hotel in Chueca, a central Madrid neighborhood, came on the scene determined to make a difference in each guest's stay.

Transform a former Madrid palace into a hotel that's a design showstopper. Add a concept that pampers the individual guest. Make it cozy, yet chic, and it's a hit from day one.

What to name a hotel is similar to naming a baby. It's often a toss-up. Will the choice fit? For the five-member naming committee of Ayre Hoteles, based in Ibiza, Spain and already "parents" to 10 hotels, the task to brand their first boutique hotel in Madrid was at hand. A lot was riding on this stellar property located in the trendy and bustling Chueca neighborhood, minutes from Madrid's center. They had to get it right.

Several goals were to be met. One would set the hotel apart from others in the four-star category; another would spotlight the unusual services provided to each guest by the hotel and its staff. That relationship would be personal, so to speak. Then, of course, was the magnificent transformation the once-regal building had undergone.

Originally, it was a mid-nineteenth-century palace that belonged to the

Maquiate de Alhama, the noble title created by Spain's Queen Elizabeth II in 1865. But it wasn't a palace set amidst sprawling grounds with fountains sprouting and with game in the fields. It was a city palace; set long and narrow between two buildings, and adorned with wrought-iron balconies that overlooked Calle Barquillo, a side street tucked away off the elegant Paseo de la Castellana. When the Maquiate died in 1915, her descendants turned the property into eight huge apartments. Over time they became dusty, deteriorated relics, no longer viable. Especially beautiful inside the former palace was the inner patio. It reached skyward four stories to create an oasis of serenity, at all times, but particularly during sweltering Madrid summers. On the building's street level was Librería Padrino, a beloved book shop.

From Decay to Opulence

Restoring an older building can be problematic, the Ayres Hoteles' group discovered, evidenced when termites were found in 40% of the upper floors. Architect Carlos Hernández-Carrillo led the €25 million restoration that replaced many beams and returned ceilings to their original splendor. The top room that once housed elevator machinery was transformed into Barquillo Secret, the most beautiful room in the hotel with a private spiral staircase. The architect's efforts

and those of the owners eventually led to the hotel winning the X Convocatoria a Los Premios a la Iniciativa Hotelera 2014 "Premio Rehabilitación" award for excellence in restoration.

A physical property is real and has a balance sheet. Memorable special touches are variables. If not provided with a sense of style and class, they can backfire. To name a hotel that's memorable, the group wanted each discerning guest to sense on arrival they would have an "only for you experience" at the 70-room hotel. That philosophy led to the only name possible: Only YOU Hotel & Lounge Madrid. And it's never translated into Spanish or another language.

When Only YOU opened in late 2013, Spain's four-star hotel industry was suffering from the country's severe economic crisis. Many of the larger hotels cut rates to survive. That short-term fix worked for some but services diminished, as did the hotels' upkeep. Raising prices then became another issue for them.

"Our concept is not to fight price with our competition. Instead, we add value," said Julio Portillo, the assistant manager at Only YOU. "You're the only guest, only you," he emphasized.

One feature is to offer stays calculated on 24 hours. Arrive at



Especially beautiful and serene is the inner patio at the Only YOU Hotel & Lounge Madrid



The Blue Lounge is known for its English-style decor and comfort

5:00pm and leave at the same time. However, arrive at 11:00pm and check out is 8:00pm, with permission to leave luggage.

Breakfast is served from 7:00am until 11:30pm "Enjoy whenever it suits you best," said Portillo. Room service is 24 hours. Take a run in nearby Retiro Park and return to the hotel for a steam bath followed by a homemade protein shake. Hangers read "You look great in that." A complimentary wide-brimmed hat is inside each closet. Slippers read "right" for the right foot and "always right" for the left foot. Shopping bags read "let's go shopping." A small jewelry box is inside the safe. Little touches. Big wins.



Happy Place Means a Happy YOU

"We're known for our service now and smiling employees," Portillo continued. "Anyone in the hotel business can smile at a guest but it's irrelevant if that person is not happy inside. We have a great team here. We have lunch together, do activities together and help each other out. And we send our guests to places chosen only by us."

The staff knows the latest about leisure, culture, business and gastronomy in Madrid, a city famous for its late nights, avant-garde dining and just plain fun. Their choices come from an insider's point of view, away from common places with a goal to anticipate visitors' tastes and preferences and adapt

to them. Management believes making the difference in a guest's hotel stay lies in paying close attention to detail.

Once the name was settled upon and amenities intact, laudable interior designer Lázaro Rosa-Violán created a style that mixes an English private club with Chinese-style mosaics and impeccable contemporary art. "We wanted to combine art history with our personal history," said Portillo.

Colors throughout are a vivid blue and white, which are the brand colors of the Palladium Hotel Group, based in Ibiza, Spain and the parent company to Ayre Hoteles. Vintage regional maps of Spain, and especially Madrid, are throughout the hotel, with

some etched on glass doors.

"It feels like a personal house when a guest walks in," Portillo said, summing up the reception area that is inside the hotel, not at the front entrance. That decision removed the mental barrier of walking into a hotel. And what a reception area it is: small and welcoming, complete with a back wall of vintage suitcases painted white. Two small elevators are disguised behind a wall of blue and white tiles. The intimate space allows the reception staff to see who's entering the elevators. There's no other access to the rooms.

Chesterfield couches and fabricated mounted trophies, especially the rhinoceros over the fireplace, accent the Blue Lounge. The former book

store became the Coctelería El Padrino bar and kept its original façade and signage. It's at the front of the hotel, perfect for foot traffic that doesn't go through the hotel. Inside the bar the walls are wood, some lined with books, to create that inviting ambiance only a great bar can exude. It's a buzzing spot for locals and tourists, especially with the nineteenth-century Teatro Infanta Isabel across the street. Getting the nod from *The New York Times* soon after opening, as a featured bar to visit in Madrid is an unbeatable accolade, combined with the hotel's consistent top ranking on TripAdvisor.

Dining at Only YOU translates to an innovative à la carte menu with an edge, created by a young team led by



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The Librería Padrino facade was kept but inside is a lively bar at Only YOU

Chef Carlos Martín. Dishes include oxtail stuffed cannelloni, grilled octopus and rack of spiced lamb, to name a few. A must have is the Jamón Ibérico de bellota, D.O. Guijuelo. The Iberian ham appetizer comes from acorn-fed pigs and is considered a delicacy for refined palates.

Word is spreading, especially among Madrileños, that Only YOU is the place to be and to be seen for

Sunday brunch. “Dolce Martedì” mimics tapas Italian-style every Tuesday night and is held in the bar with patrons spilling over into the Blue Lounge.

Only YOU rooms, some with balconies, some with water-vapor-fired fireplaces, are over-the-top modern, with soundproof windows, free Wi-Fi, 42-inch LCD Satellite Smart TVs, audio systems for iPod,

iPhone and MP3. Each bed has a high-quality memory mattress. Duvets are 100% goose feathers, complemented with a pillow menu. “If someone has rested well, they will be in a good mood,” Portillo said. And what better way to discover the environs around the Only YOU Hotel & Lounge Madrid than in a good mood.

Beyond the Front Door

Located in the lively Chueca neighborhood, best known as the gay area of Madrid, the district teems with small shops, bars, restaurants and a spirited compact square. Walkable is the mantra when visiting Madrid and Chueca is one of the best areas to begin those walks. The Gran Vía is a few blocks away as is the fashionable Salamanca district and pedestrian street Calle Fuencarral. And the hotel is close to Madrid’s “golden triangle,” which is three top museums, each a ten-minute walk from the others: the Reina Sofía, the Prado and the Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Just around the corner from Only YOU is the Mercado de San Antón,

another neighborhood revival that took five years and €15 million to complete. The three-level market has a gleaming and open center filled with stall after stall of food, flowers, cheese and much more. On the Upper levels, grab food on the go or sit at communal counters to eat and people-watch.

The top level houses La Cocina de San Antón. Purchase raw meat or fish at the market below and have it sent to the restaurant to be prepared for a meal with a personalized touch. All told, bets are the noble Alhama family would be pleased with the remarkable restoration and first-class aura that returned to the former palace. Everyone else is, too. Only YOU Hotel & Lounge Madrid is located at Calle Barquillo, 21. Contact is www.onlyyouhotels.com or call (34) 91-005-2222.

For information about Madrid, contact its official tourist office at www.esmadrid.com/en/. It’s main tourist center is located in the Plaza Mayor, 27 (Casa de la Panadería).



Tile depiction of Madrid on a Chueca wall at Taberna de Angel Sierra