

Hotelier Richard Helfer is back with One Farrer Hotel & Spa in Little India, which boasts multiple hotel concepts under one roof



Natasha Ann Zachariah
Design Reporter

At a time when many hotels are paring down their offerings to just bare basics and introducing more do-it-yourself services for guests, opening a five-star luxury hotel with attention to detail bucks the trend.

But Dr Richard Helfer, 64, the hotelier behind the newly opened One Farrer Hotel & Spa in Little India, would not have it any other way.

In the rooms, you have free mini bars with free-flow snacks and smooth-as-silk bedlinen from Frette, a luxe Italian brand.

Cannot get to the door just yet? Press the "Please Wait" button to tell your visitor to hang on a minute.

Should you fancy a full body check-up with your stay, you can head over to the first-class medical facilities within the compound.

Dr Helfer, an industry veteran who is best known for his Raffles Hotel restoration here more than two decades ago, says: "People appreciate it. They feel like they are at home. When we keep an eye out for even the smallest detail, guests do remember and that's what keeps them coming back."

The hotel, which markets itself as a "hotels within a hotel" concept, is part of Connexion, an \$800-million integrated space which also includes the Farrer Park Medical Centre, a hospital and a conference centre.

The complex is built directly above the Farrer Park MRT station and sits a stone's throw away from shopping haven Mustafa.

Although there are multiple hotel names such as the Urban Hotel and the Skyline Hotel within the development, they are all housed in the same building, but on different floors. The higher you go in the building, the pricier and more luxe the rooms get.

On the 16th and 17th floors, for example, you get the Loft Apartments, which are two-storey walk-ups. Each apartment, meant for long-term guests, has a living area and kitchenette. Rates start from \$450 a night, with a minimum stay of seven nights.

On the 18th to 20th floors, you have the Skyline Hotel, which has 84 rooms and costs \$390 a night, and six Sky Villas.

The villas, costing at least \$3,000 a night, are named after flowers such as heliconia, jasmine and peony. Each room, except the \$10,000-a-night Presidential Suite, is also furnished with the fresh flowers they are named after.

They all have designer furniture, personal outdoor courtyards, wine cellars, lava rock barbecue grills and heated jacuzzi pools.

One Farrer Hotel & Spa is owned by



Dr Richard Helfer personally oversaw the curation of the hotel's burgeoning art collection numbering about 700 pieces.

Going One up on luxe

The Farrer Park Company, which was formerly known as Singapore HealthPartners and is made up of a collective of private medical specialists and some foreign investors, Dr Helfer is a member of the board of The Farrer Park Company and chairman of the hotel.

There are 243 rooms, decked out in contemporary interiors. The Urban Hotel caters to the everyday traveller, with typical room furnishings such as a 55-inch smart television, a work desk and a rain shower. Room rates start from \$280.

Communal facilities include an Olympic-size pool with a skyline view, Japanese-style onsens and 14 gardens.

There are also 10 dining options, including the Boxkite Lounge, where guests can dine under a to-scale replica of the Bristol Box-Kite biplane. The plane model was used in Singapore's first manned air flight in the area in 1911.

Dr Helfer wove the area's history into the decor as he felt that it was something

guests should know about. After all, the eight roads criss-crossing Farrer Park were named after historic English locales such as Bristol and Carlisle. The area was labelled Little England for the early immigrants it attracted. Singapore's first horse race in 1936 also took place nearby.

Dr Helfer was surprised at the location when he first heard about it, though he now considers it a gem.

He says: "In my 30 years in Singapore, I didn't think that anything could still be undiscovered. But here was this plot of land, so close to town, and still has so much local flavour. After so many years of doing hotels, I still believe it's all about location, location, location."

Dr Helfer, a Singapore permanent resident who lives in a shophouse in Emerald Hill, also personally oversaw the curation of the hotel's burgeoning art collection. There are about 700 pieces of artworks, from sculptures to paintings, from established and emerging artists from the region.

Some of the artists include Myanmar painter Soe Soe, whose work hangs in the Presidential Suite, and Bali-born artist Made Mahendra Mangku, whose abstract works are placed around the Urban Hotel.

Dr Helfer, who is also chairman of Sculpture Square, a non-profit, independent arts organisation which took 2½ years to curate the art, says: "I wanted an art presence in as many public places as possible. It sets the tone and look of the hotel and gives each space its own personality."

The hotel opened in January and the youthful-looking hospitality maestro can now breathe a little easier, having worked on the project for the last eight years.

He was one of the most prominent hoteliers in Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1986, after working his way up the Westin hotel group as a trainee, he came to Singapore to open the Westin Stamford, Westin Plaza and the Raffles City Convention Centre in City Hall.

Coming back after a hiatus working with Singapore hotels, Dr Helfer, who is married to a Hawaii-based lawyer, still plays a behind-the-scenes role in various hotel and lifestyle projects and has also diversified into food and beverage.

He is the chairman of RCH International and Creo Lifestyle International, his two companies which focus on advising, designing and developing hospitality and mixed-use lifestyle projects. In 2009, he opened roast chicken joint, Charly T's, which has since closed all its outlets, and started the now-defunct crepe place, Out Of The Pan, in Raffles City.

Due to his worldwide connections, the Michigan-born native is still an American citizen and holds Cambodian citizenship. He is also a permanent resident of Canada.

Even with so many years in the business, he is not resting on his laurels. "Every day, I feel like I'm learning. I've been in this business for so long, but I will never say 'been there, done that'."

natashaz@sph.com.sg



PHOTOS: DANIEL NEO, ONE FARRER HOTEL & SPA



Peony Villa (above left) is one of six villas under the newly opened One Farrer Hotel & Spa (above right).

Escape Restaurant & Lounge (left), where diners can watch chefs at work, is one of 10 dining options available.



A replica of the Bristol Box-Kite biplane hangs in the Boxkite Lounge.



The lounge area features a Persian patchwork carpet that took eight months to make and Cityscape (Big City) painting (background) by Laotian artist Sivlay Souvannasing.

Communal facilities include Japanese-style onsens (right) and 14 gardens.



Singapore-based conceptual artist Kumari Nahappan's 2.85m-tall bronze apple sculpture (left) greets visitors at the entrance while in the reception area, guests can view an artwork (above) by Cultural Medallion recipient Milenko Prvacki, the largest artwork in the hotel's collection.