

VIRGIN HOTELS EDINBURGH

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

A new addition to the hospitality scene in Scotland's capital, Virgin Hotels was a refreshing brand choice to pair with one of Edinburgh's most treasured listed buildings. Was it a match well made? Hospitality Interiors' Sophie Harper visited the hotel to find out





The gentle upward curve of picturesque Victoria Street in Edinburgh's Old Town has to be one of the most alluring streets in the UK. Colourful shopfronts and Flemish-styled neo-classical architecture make for an excellent backdrop for tourist photos, whilst being perfectly positioned in the heart of the city's lively old quarter, close to Edinburgh Castle and just off the famous Royal Mile.

Housed at the top of the street, the India Buildings are a huddle of iconic connecting buildings that snake from street level under and overground in one singular form. Stretching out behind itself, the building is much larger than it appears from its frontage.

Built in 1864 by architect David Cousins, the India Buildings were designed in the fashionable Scots Baronial style of the time, complete with turret inspired by medieval battlements. Its occupants have included the

British Linen Bank, the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, the Geological Survey of Scotland, and the city's registry office, but, following a decade of complete refurbishment (including mandatory excavation), the listed building is now host to Virgin Hotels Edinburgh, the first hotel for the brand outside of America.

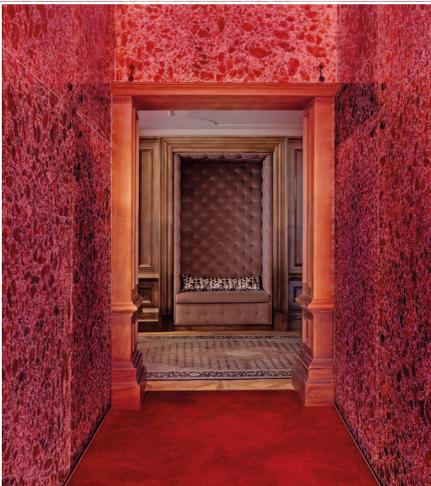
The signage on the outside of the building is subtle, whereas large red lacquered doors are a nod to brand colours and an indication of what awaits inside – but there is nothing lairier than a small Virgin Hotels sign on the facade. "It was really important that we didn't just plaster a giant Virgin Hotels sign on the hotel," says Teddy Mayer, creative director and VP of design, Virgin Hotels, "especially in a UNESCO World Heritage Site – you're just not allowed to do that anyway – so here you'll see that iconic bright red door and you'll know exactly where you are."

Across the threshold stands the grand staircase – draped in more red, of course. Climbing the stairs feels as though you are ascending towards the heavens somewhat, with a glass domed 'Oculus' overhead leading to the Rotunda Room, where the best suites – including Sir Richard's Flat and the grand chamber suites – reside.

"In the dome we used historic colours and Victorian tiles, which have been repaired and restored," Teddy explains. "We even repeated that same tile pattern in the carpet on the balcony level that's included as part of the Oculus, so when you're up above you can look down on this really interesting pattern that spirals down towards the ground."

Back on ground level, guests are ushered to check in at reception via an illuminated red glass walkway, which feels like an art installation in a contemporary museum. "You

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know once you walk through that portal you're kind of leaving the world as you know it behind and entering into a space that is historical but enchanted with the Virgin tone of voice and Virgin service," says Teddy. "The first thing you see when you go to check in is a huge sign that says 'You Are Welcome', which is something we include at all our hotels. It comes in many forms – sometimes it's a mosaic floor tile, or in this case a really beautiful backlit sign on a wooden wall – and now, more than ever, it's a really important sentiment to convey to everybody."

Guests can check into one of 222 rooms, accessed via bronzed and leather-clad lifts situated through the labyrinth of wooden panelled walls, the cosy library (complete with fireside seating), and stylish monochrome library cafe.

Rooms are modern and pared-back in comparison to the rest of the hotel, with a pale

colour palette, and functional sleeping areas. Dressing areas have been cleverly fitted to the nooks and crannies of unusually shaped spaces, with cabinetry encompassing vanity units and open wardrobe space opposite separate enclosures for WC and shower.

One of the nicest touches comes from the selection of local treats offered at guest room mini bars, in the form of Edinburgh gins, shortbread, and Tunnock's Caramel Wafers, to name just a few.

There's something for everyone when it comes to the F&B facilities at Virgin Hotels Edinburgh. The fun-but-chilled vibes at Eve, where a cocktail or two can be enjoyed whilst watching local bands in the evening, extend to morning service as the on-site breakfast destination. The sugar-candy palette is as delightful as its staff, and has a lovely local feel thanks to its friendly atmosphere. Pinks,

blues, yellows and greens mightn't sound like a relaxing colour scheme, but, paired with plush furnishings and lots of plant life, it is a surprisingly serene space. Unique wall murals add pops of interest and even more colour combinations, with each relating heavily to Scottish heritage, the building itself, or of the Virgin brand – including details like the Tubular Bells earrings on Capercaillie Woman, referencing the first album ever released on Virgin Records.

In contrast, the Commons Club Bar is beautifully traditional in its styling, reminiscent of old smoking lounges or whisky bars. Tall ceilings are highlighted with decorative coving and walls are covered in expertly carved wood panelling. A grand fireplace surrounded by interesting artwork sets a gentle ambience for the taupe and charcoal banquettes by the windows, whilst elegant leather seating at the

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bar beckons smaller groups to socialise with the lively bar staff.

Underground, the swanky Commons Club restaurant is a dark and sultry space where diners can enjoy executive chef Steven Wilson’s seasonal menu under exposed stone archways, from the comfort of jewel-toned seating and marble tables. “The two F&B concepts are completely different but complementary to their location and the building,” says Scott McArdel, GM, Virgin Hotels Edinburgh. “There are lots of moments to be surprised by as you come through our doors.”

Scott tells me how important the team is to the atmosphere of the hotel. “I’d say 95% of our staff have come from the Edinburgh market,” he says. “We wanted a team that were in tune with the city, who knew what was hot and happening in Edinburgh, so we have local baristas, local cocktail connoisseurs, people that really bring that authentic Scottish

vibrancy to the property and hopefully can really add something to the amazing design.

We want to give our international visitors a true Scottish experience.”

Responsible for the design and reconstruction of the building were Ica, Four-by-Two and Joelle Reid Interiors. From Ica MD Susannah Macneill first sketched out designs in 2013 with a brief to create a high-end hotel to showcase contemporary Edinburgh, without undermining the architectural style of the surrounding buildings. Speaking about the project, the team states: “Our approach begins with a design that is entirely in proportion to the scale and tone of the townscape – sympathetic, but never apologetic. From many vantage points, this is a hidden hotel. To achieve this we had to understand a range of constraints and concerns, then meet them head-on with creativity. We collaborated with Virgin to bring their concepts to life in all the

unique spaces this hotel offers. This was about extending the architectural concept to the interior design, at once enhancing the features of three listed buildings, but at the same time anchoring everything in the experience guests have come to expect from Virgin Hotels. It’s about working to a creative brief rather than following a prescriptive set of standards.”

Virgin Hotels Edinburgh is no ordinary hotel. Its sense of fun complements the building’s quirky character, and brings a fresh perspective, linking the Old Town to the new. With Virgin Hotels now looking to branch out across the rest of Europe, Edinburgh is likely to remain the flagship – and a charming example to set the level.

www.virginhotels.com
www.ica.studio
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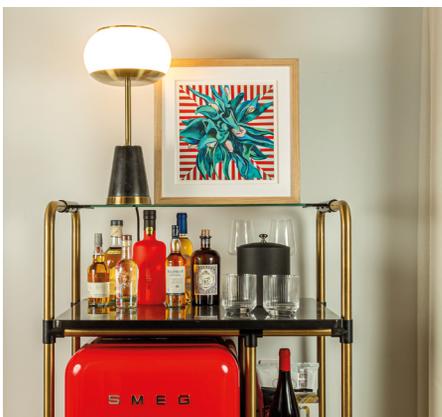


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CHELSON CREATES BESPOKE LIGHTING SCHEME FOR VIRGIN HOTELS

Nestled in Edinburgh’s Old Town, renowned for its diverse architectural character, the main challenge for the project was to combine the restoration of three distinctly separate listed buildings with new-build elements to re-establish the historic nature of this World Heritage site while showcasing contemporary Edinburgh. ICA created a bold yet sympathetic design that blends with the vernacular while creating an interior scheme that brought the signature Virgin brand identity and character to life.



In combining old with new, contemporary design elements were introduced throughout, and the lighting scheme was no exception, being completely individual in its entirety – as to be expected from Virgin. The lighting designs for the project were a bold and eclectic mix, generating a contrast between old and new, light and dark, traditional and contemporary.

The Chelson team worked collaboratively with a number of key stakeholders from the get-go, both on- and off-site, to ensure they met the complex requirements of the project – including the clear design vision of ICA and

Virgin, the procurement team at Blue Moon to ensure they hit the right price point, and the logistics team. because the site location meant that there were tight restrictions for deliveries, and subsequently a regimented delivery schedule was implemented to meet phased installation dates. Chelson created 63 different ranges, and in total 2383 individual pieces were delivered and installed for the project, each one going through a rigorous testing process to ensure 100% compatibility with the specialist on-site dimming system created by VDA.

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