

# Armani's Hotel Debut, Tailored for Dubai

The design is chic, the lunches are \$44 and the door handles can be elusive

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ

**T**HE ARMANI EXPERIENCE begins with a Bentley waiting at the Dubai International Airport. The driver offers a cold towel and a choice of still or sparkling water while, fittingly, Travié McCoy's chart-topper "Billionaire" plays on the radio. Though it's 6 a.m., the staff whisk a traveler from the muted atrium lobby of circular steel grey couches to the eighth floor.

"Mr. Armani doesn't believe in waiting on lines. Reception will take place in the comfort of your room," says Barbara Cardilli, a personal Armani Lifestyle Manager.

The Armani Hotel Dubai, Giorgio Armani's debut in the hotel world, occupies 10 floors in the world's highest tower with 160 guest rooms, eight restaurants and lounges, a 12,000-square-foot spa and other Armani-branded retail shops. The lines are clean and the colors—gray, chocolate brown, black, and crème with red accents—are strong. Canadian Ermosa marble flooring and rich satin and silk sofa coverings make the Armani feel expensive. Make no mistake: It is.

Still, Dubai's glamour has taken a few hits since the fashion icon and Emaar Properties—developer of the Dubai Mall—began construction of the hotel in 2005 as part of the Burj Khalifa tower. Saddled by debt, the Dubai government has accepted bailouts from oil-rich Abu Dhabi to complete its star ventures.

The Armani hotel, which opened in April, will soon have some fashion-world competition: Elisabeta Gucci is directing the construction of an 87-room hotel, while Donatella Versace will open the second Palazzo Versace (the first is on Australia's Gold Coast) on Dubai Creek.

Since my visit coincided with Dubai's oppressive summer, my studio room was \$555. In high season, from November to April, that number doubles. Suites like the Ambassador (which has a wraparound balcony overlooking the city) can top \$10,000 per night.

African zebrawood and black Japanese tatami flooring line the three identical corridors that house the guest rooms. Within, Armani/Casa



Armani Hotels

furnishings dominate, accented by luxury brands like Limoges and Bose. Satin grey walls meet checkered headboards. Plush beds are dressed with the finest linens. Bathrooms are outfitted with grey stone sinks and floors, Marmorino walls, and a high-pressure rain shower. Camel-colored soaps shaped like stones that Mr. Armani discovered while walking on an Italian beach speak to his level of input in the project.

A vault-like vestibule leads to the room, where much is hidden in the walls or the backs of drawers. Asked where simple things such as door handles and outlets were, staffers answered: "Mr. Armani wants guests to discover for themselves." A hotel spokesman later added: "The design

inspiration reflects Giorgio Armani's personal style. The hotel is a realization of his dream to have a hotel where he can stay and entertain family and friends." Still, it was easy to get lost searching for the elevators, the pool, or the Indian restaurant, Armani/Amal. Luckily, staff members lurked in hidden corners to give directions, but after a day on-site, it would have been nice to find the room without assistance.

Easier to find were the lobby-level restaurants. The impeccably displayed breakfast buffet at Armani/Mediterraneo cost \$35, plus \$10 more for a hot selection such as caramelized French toast or an egg-white-and-asparagus omelet.

The pool, a wraparound slip of

The lobby, upper left, of the Armani Hotel Dubai; lower left, the view from a suite corridor; above, the entrance to the hotel.

deck lined with signature grey umbrellas, was eerily empty despite Dubai's 113-degree heat. It took about 20 minutes to locate an attendant but after that the service regained perfection. Lunch, the most economical meal, was \$44 for a Lebanese mezze platter, chicken sandwich and French fries.

After a run in the pristine gym came a massage in the Armani/SPA. In a small relaxation room of blush drapery, with the soothing patter of recorded falling rain, an attendant asked a host of wellness-themed questions, which took the place of a menu. The therapist would build a memorable, personalized treatment around the answers, though it would have been nice to know the price of the 50-minute treatment (\$180) before signing for it.

Armani/Ristorante proved a culinary gem. Chef Alessandro Salvatico, doing a sort of dance between the tables and his open kitchen, offered fresh mozzarella with 25-year old balsamic, mushroom and truffle ri-

sotto, halibut in clam sauce—the best being the creamy Bavarese dessert, a golden ball of exploding flavors that, according to Mr. Salvatico, "represented Dubai's place as the pearl of the Middle East." It came complimentary to a dinner that cost \$375 for two without a bottle of wine—by Dubai's standards, a pretty good deal.

Next came a visit to Armani/Privé, the upscale lounge with reservations required for any of its tables. Splashier than the hotel, Armani/Privé houses what's billed by the hotel as the world's largest LCD screen projecting coordinated images to the DJ's spin. One hour of the lounge's cigarette smoke and noise was enough, and prompting a retreat to the tamer Armani/Lounge that overlooks the Dubai Fountain. Illuminated by 6,600 lights, the fountain shoots water 500 feet high to a soundtrack of world music—a much better way to end the evening.

Mr. Armani plans to open another property in Milan, in 2011.