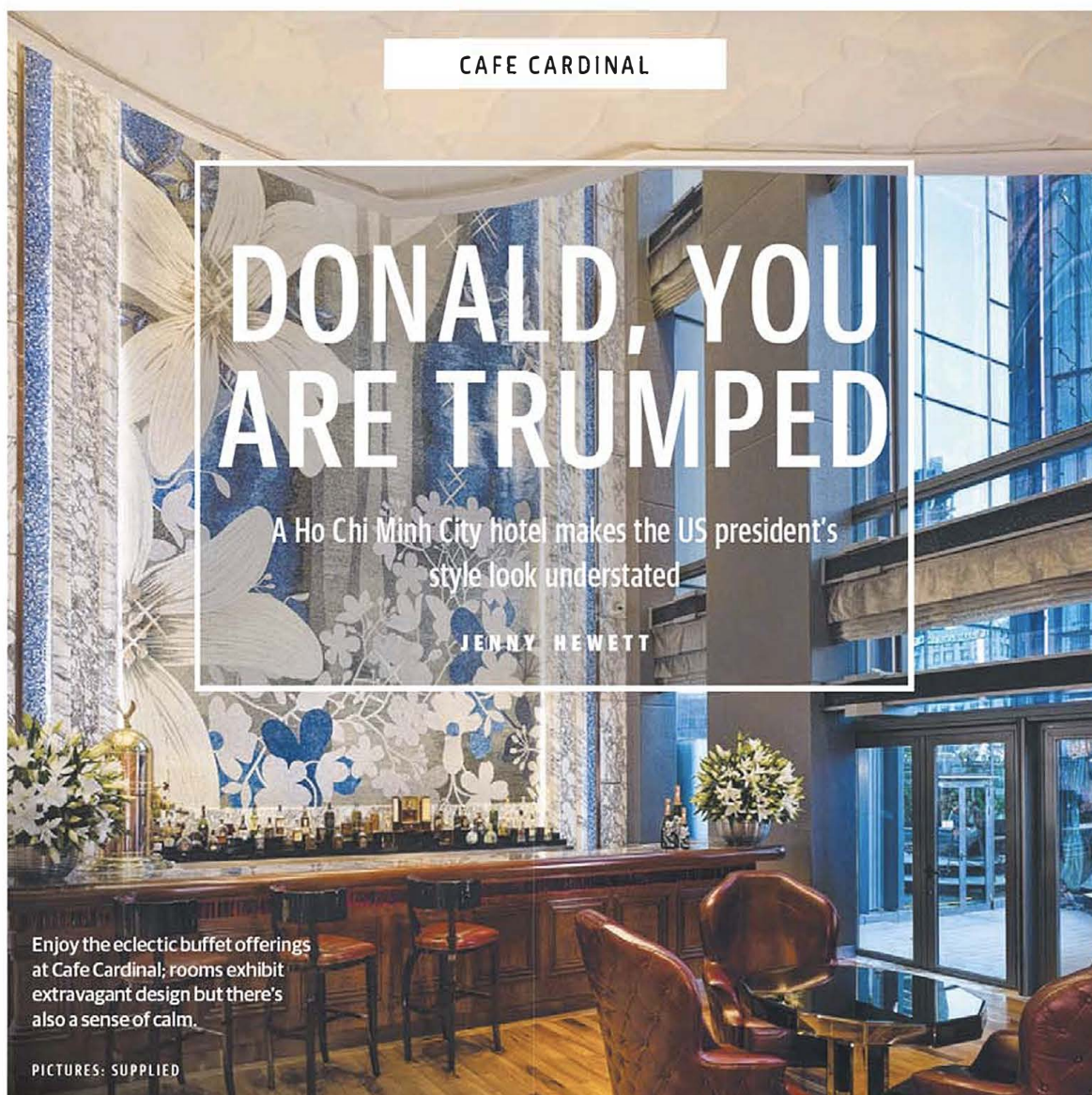


HOTELS ♦ VIETNAM



CAFE CARDINAL

DONALD, YOU ARE TRUMPED

A Ho Chi Minh City hotel makes the US president's style look understated

JENNY HEWETT

Enjoy the eclectic buffet offerings at Cafe Cardinal; rooms exhibit extravagant design but there's also a sense of calm.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED

Some hotels are known for dividing public opinion. Bold, brash, lavish; you either love them or you don't. After almost two weeks' travelling from the north of Vietnam to the southern capital of Ho Chi Minh City, I'm intrigued to see why The Reverie Saigon is one about which people seem so passionate.

As I step out of the incandescent, geode resin art elevator into the ornate, seventh-floor lobby of this Italian-designed stay, it's immediately obvious.

This is a hotel that doesn't do things in halves. Imported Italian marble covers the floors and walls, creating a decadent canvas for vibrant floral mosaics, an enormous, swirling canary yellow and cobalt blue carpet and plush, Baroque-style decor. Gold is dripping from the elevators and from the oversized Italian furnishings, including a custom-made Baldi clock and a gilt, 5m-long Colombostiles sofa,

hand made in purple ostrich leather and threaded with amethyst.

A member of the prestigious Leading Hotels of The World group, and the only hotel in Vietnam to be accepted into its elite portfolio of luxe digs, The Reverie Saigon is not lacking in personality.

SKY HIGH

Layered gold, marble, silk, glass and crystal, this 286-room, Vietnamese-owned hotel occupies the upper levels of the 39-storey Times Square Building in Ho Chi Minh City's up-market District 1. It may seem cliché to suggest my 32nd-floor room floats in the clouds, but the wraparound, floor-to-ceiling windows and lofty views over Saigon River really do have me hovering in heaven.

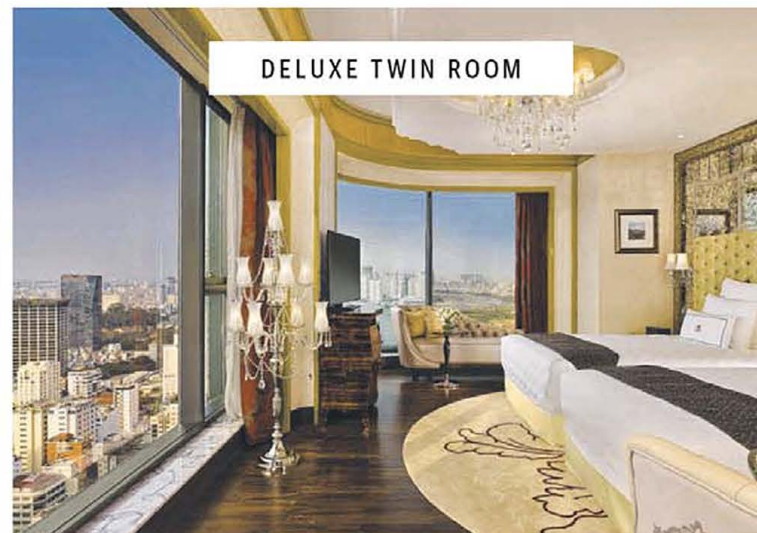
Taking the advice of one of my travel acquaintances, like a child, I test my courage and step on to the interior window ledge of my room, leaning my whole body against the

glass skyscraper to get a feel for the dizzying heights. Go on, give it a go.

THE DIGS

Nothing short of opulent, the hotel's extravagant design ethos may not be to everyone's taste, but it grows on me. My Panorama Deluxe Room is less showy than the lobby and some of the most expensive suites, including the two-storey Presidential Suite. Rather, it imparts a sense of calm. A pillow menu accompanies the fluffy, kingsize bed, which is backed by a tufted silk headboard in mint, and a Baroque-style standing chandelier dresses one corner of the room.

Classic details are paired with mod cons, such as electric curtains, handy built-in universal sockets for electronics and a TV that disappears into the dresser. After turndown each night, it broadcasts the cosy fire of your dreams, which begs to be enjoyed with the bottle of red in the complimentary minibar.



DELUXE TWIN ROOM

THE WET ROOM

Smoothed in neutral-toned marble (which is a bit slippery underfoot), with dual washbasins, natural light, a shower and bath with river views and a TV, the bathroom is an extension of the hotel's immaculate Italian design. Shelfspace for toiletries is limited, but the sumptuous Hermes amenities should suffice, if you wish to pack light.

THE CITY

A mere stroll from some of Ho Chi Minh City's best landmarks such as the French colonial Opera House, neoclassical Central Post Office and historic Reunification Palace, The Reverie Saigon is a retreat in the thick of District 1's sophisticated centre.

I soak up the city over a few hours in the evening on the back of a vintage scooter with Vespa Adventures. A welcome assault on the senses, the Saigon By Night tour is a whiz of neon colour, motorbikes and flaming pans.

We fill our bellies with signature eats from south Vietnam, including banh xe pancakes, mussels with peanuts and fried frog, followed by nightcaps at Cooku Nest, a bar where mostly couples sit by candlelight listening to live Vietnamese ballads.

THE EATS

Breakfast unfolds in a hush of crinkling newspapers and tinkling silverware at Cafe Cardinal, where a buffet of chicken pate, sushi, smoothies, prosecco, dried fruit and Vietnamese options is on offer. Poached egg with asparagus, foie gras and truffle can be ordered a la carte.

For lunch, I dine on up-market Cantonese at The Royal Pavilion, where I create my own dim sum of succulent prawn dumplings, stewed chicken feet, barbecue pork buns and deep fried pork dumplings. A few streets down is Aussie chef Luke Nguyen's Vietnam House, owned by

ESCAPE ROUTE

HO CHI MINH CITY

GETTING THERE

Vietnam Airlines flies direct to Ho Chi Minh City from Melbourne and Sydney. vietnamairlines.com

STAYING THERE

The Reverie Saigon has opulent rooms with sky-high city and river views from \$335 a night. thereveriesaigon.com

The Reverie Saigon – with its gently spiced waygu beef pho and Iberico pork and prawn on rice paper, a lesson in culinary finesse.

THE SPA

Spread out over two floors, the pampering parlour is as opulent as the rest of the hotel, with marble floors, a grand staircase, pink carpet and gilt trims. Bliss out to the Tibetan-inspired Five Elements treatment, which involves aromatherapy oils, hot poultice compress, hot stones on my chakra points and a sweeping massage with just the right amount of pressure.

Save time to unwind in the glowing Himalayan salt sauna and alternate dimension-like colour therapy steam room, looking more like a nightclub than wellness portal. The outdoor pool, though small, is the perfect place to reset among the skyscrapers.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF THE REVERIE SAIGON