



TRAVEL

How Aman Changed Hotel Design Forever

Thirty years ago marked the beginning of a new chapter in hospitality—the inception of a new elite club of the most discerning travelers and aesthetes

TEXT BY [KATHERYN BOMEY](#) | Posted October 9, 2018



With an estimated \$4 million budget, Amanpuri opened in 1988 on the Thai island of Phuket, designed by Ed Tuttle well before the time of iPhones, Instagram, and even the Internet. (By way of contrast, the fourth through 26th floors of the Crown Building in Manhattan, the site of the forthcoming Aman New York, were purchased for \$500 million in 2015, with a planned penthouse residence to be sold for more than \$100 million.) Its development by brand founder Adrian Zecha—then 55 years old—proved to be groundbreaking. The name means “peace” in Sanskrit, and would be the principle embodied by each subsequent reveal from Vietnam to Montenegro and Indonesia to Turks & Caicos.

Though the intention of Aman was never to change the hospitality industry—or to be the biggest or the best—COO Roland Fasel says it has organically grown around the idea of creating the most incredible possible guest experience through destinations that grow authentically out of their environments and allow the landscape to take center stage. “It is this element of our design ethos and respect for nature that has allowed us to set the benchmark in the industry for providing buildings of architectural distinction,” he says. Along with a legacy of pleasing, minimalist silhouettes and beautiful landscaping, the brand is known as intimate, intuitive, and discreet, with rigorous attention to detail.



Amanpuri on the Thai island of Phuket.

Photo: John W. McDermott / Courtesy of Aman

As of its 30th birthday this year, Aman comprises 31 properties, of which eight were designed by Jean-Michel Gathy of Denniston. The company gives its core group of architects—Ed Tuttle and the late Kerry Hill round out the holy trinity—significant freedom. Gathy is currently working on his eighth, Aman New York, which will have 83 guest rooms, 20 residences, a three-story spa, a jazz club, a Japanese restaurant, a piano bar, and a wine “library.” (His others are Aman Venice, Amanoi, Aman Sveti Stefan, Aman at Summer Place, Amanyara, Aman I-Khas, and Amanwana.)



Aman Tokyo.

Photo: Nacasa & Partners Inc. / Courtesy of Aman

Gathy first met Zecha through a project he'd designed in the Maldives. "Now I believe Adrian Zecha was attracted by the fact that I design—I still do and I've always done so—in a very balanced and geometrical pattern," he says. "It's never a funny-looking shape you may not understand the reason of; it's always properly organized, structured, relatively symmetrical—and, obviously, this attracted Adrian Zecha." The Malaysia-based architect recognizes a specific DNA in Aman properties but is quick to point out it's not a singular brand signature but rather his, Hill's, and Tuttle's work, representing various design personalities operating within a similar skeleton, that has established the look of Aman. "Consistency makes the value of the brand."

"I think the Aman look is balanced, aesthetically peaceful, pleasant, understated, and dramatic, even though it's understated—a succession of drama and intimacy," says Gathy, who plays around the concept of symmetry, which he says is proven in studies to be preferred by the human brain. Also important aesthetically for Aman: blending into the environment (and keeping properties low-density) to optimize peacefulness. Whether landing in Bhutan, Italy, or the Philippines, this is something, he says, that is "fundamentally anchored into your intellectual reflex."



Amansara in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Photo: John McDermott / Courtesy of Aman

Gathy believes Aman has been most influential in creating a market for a product marrying aesthetics and lifestyle, which has given rise to many copycats attempting this principle. His other clients ask for “something with the same balance, values as Aman, but obviously we are never asked to copy.” Neither is West Coast architect Grant Kirkpatrick of KAA Design Group, though he has built several homes influenced heavily by Aman properties and for 15 years has been hearing references by clients. He has nicknamed a current project on the Strand in Manhattan Beach, California, “Amanhattan,” and says another completed home was very much inspired by Amangiri, which spawned “one of the loveliest design recon missions I have ever had to do.”

That couple was driven by several attributes of the iconic Utah resort: “The serenity and simplicity. The highly contextual response to the existing terrain. Minimalist but warm; contemporary but not cold,” says Kirkpatrick. “My client is world-traveled and very design savvy, and she knew that the power of Amangiri was how well it connects to its surroundings, so the idea was to find that connection with her home’s location.” They wound up using large panel-formed concrete walls and contrasting tones of wood, juxtaposed against natural earth-colored stone floors and wood walls and ceilings for a strong “rooted” dynamic.

While a significant portion of Amans are built from the ground up, several boast structures with fascinating histories, including the former royal retreat built in Cambodia’s Golden Age that’s now Siem Reap’s Amansara; the 16th-century palazzo that became Aman Venice, in Italy; and Amanyangyun, the brand’s latest opening, in early 2018. The 26 antique dwellings in China’s fourth Aman resort traveled more than 400 miles, “the result of a staggeringly ambitious 15-year conservation initiative, which saw nothing less than the relocation of a forest and the reconstruction of an historic village,” says Fasel. Hill seamlessly integrated contemporary comfort into the more-than-400-year-old fabric of the ancient buildings, which still bear the legacy of their former owners in the form of ornate stone carvings and inscriptions depicting family histories.

Rumors of CEO Vladislav Doronin going on a massive land shopping spree all over the globe spread in 2016, and indeed the future is something he's concentrated on since purchasing the brand (Zecha is no longer involved) in 2014. That same year marked the first city hotel, in Tokyo, "with its ability to immediately transport guests away from the frenetic pace of the city to the tranquil experience of being ensconced in an Aman," says Fasel. It was an important harbinger of things to come; Doronin's vision is to go from horizontal to vertical—urbanizing the resort model that has been so successful.



Another view of Amanyangyun, the brand's latest opening.

Photo: Sui Sicong / Courtesy of Aman

While the brand began in the East, forthcoming expansion will focus more on the Western Hemisphere. Other new locations will be close to existing properties, allowing travelers to more easily have an exclusively Aman-hosted experience. The company signed 11 new hotels and resorts in 2016 alone. Upcoming locations, according to Fasel, include Amanvari on the East Cape of Baja California (coming in 2020), Southeast Asia, the U.S., Europe, and more in Japan.

Amanvari, the first Mexican destination, demonstrates this future plan. L.A.-based real estate firm Irongate is developing the property and commissioned architects Heah & Co. (Amanera in the Dominican Republic) to design the resort with the “overriding objective of allowing the surreal landscape to take center stage,” says Fasel. To wit, each stilted, slender-legged pavilion he describes as “a serene island rising from the boundless terrain, allowing the lush flora and fauna to flow uninterrupted below.” friend. It’s a state of uncomplicated serenity.”



The soon-to-open Amanvari on the East Cape of Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

Photo: Courtesy of Aman

It’s not surprising that each new Aman has a residential component, after all it was long poised for a crossover. “They have successfully used some of the finest architects in the world to create a consistent and compelling series of almost must-see resorts [where] it’s always about the connection to place,” says Kirkpatrick, who each year buys the entire Aman brochure set so he’s prepared to understand exactly what his clients might be referring to. “This has created a pilgrimage mentality with many customers.” Says Fasel, “Staying with Aman is akin to being a guest at the incredible private home of a wonderful friend. It’s a state of uncomplicated serenity.”