

AS WELL as excellent beer, Prague is known for its magnificent architecture, which could serve as a lesson in classic building styles from Gothic and Renaissance to Art Nouveau and Cubism.

The city of a thousand spires also celebrates modern architecture, such as Zaha Hadid's Masaryk railway station, and Vlado Milunic and Frank Ghery's Dancing House.

Bohemian glass has been produced here since the 13th century, and its handmade high-quality crystal is world-famous. Czech design is based on craftsmanship – in glass as in other materials – and has been enjoying a revival since 1989, with the focus today being on sustainability and innovation.

So, it's no surprise that Prague has an annual design festival every autumn – Designblok, now in its 27th year. From modest beginnings and 14 designers, it's grown to 200 designers and 30,000 visitors.

As well as crystal, there are ceramics, jewellery, fashion, eyewear, furniture, lighting, home accessories and toys. The theme this year was 'courage'.

Although the festival naturally attracts design students and designers, it aims to appeal to all, from the moderately curious browser to the interested buyers.

It's arranged over four sites in central Prague, all easy to reach by tram. It's perfect to dip in and out and focus on what grabs your fancy.

If you can't wait until next October, most of the designers have their studios in town or you may buy their pieces online, and the art museums are open all year.

The largest site is the Krizik Pavilions, recently refurbished, where registration takes place and four pavilions show artwork. Exhibiter Modernista was showing recreations of heritage wooden furniture design as well as modern lighting by Pavel Janak.

Montana had useful metal cupboards in a range of bright colours and Marketa Kratochvilova, showing for the first time, was modelling her intricate statement rings fashioned from precious metals and stones.

Also here was the children's room pavilion – Designblok For Kids – with a futuristic-looking bouncy castle, Place of Joy by Maxim Velocovsky, that seemed to be living up to its name.

There were tables and chairs for supervising parents, and on show were children's toys and bedroom furniture. Outside were several food trucks, and a cheese and cabbage pancake went down well.

A tram ride away at The Museum of Decorative Arts, I was smitten with first-timer David Suncik and his naive funny ceramic creatures, with amusing surprised expressions. He was doing a roaring trade. You may buy his pieces online, they start at around €200.

Exhibiter Natalie Costantino designs a modular porcelain tiling system, that can be used to make a shelf. As



BY OLIVIA GREENWAY

Art warming: Clockwise from main, the centre of Prague; Art at the Almanac X Alcron hotel; Some of the eclectic art on display; and Frank Ghery's Dancing House

well as being aesthetically pleasing, it is practical too. Maalstrom studio, founded by Lubomir Kuca, produces striking traditional wooden receptacles that are then finished with paint or stencil.

On to Galerie Rudolfinum, a handsome neo-Renaissance building on the banks of the Vltava River housing international contemporary art exhibitions. It was here Mary McCartney was showing her collection entitled Striking by Playce.

A woman is sitting with her back to us, wearing a red dress, which she appears to be reluctantly unzipping. It's not obvious from this portrait that it's Kate Moss, because that's not the point.

Another image is of a young woman getting out of a taxi

and using her palm to shield her face.

I know McCartney as a cookbook writer – Food is one of my favourite books – but I now appreciate she is also a credible photographer of 30 years' standing.

While here, don't miss the wonderful cafe with its floor-to-ceiling windows, fresh flowers and no background music to spoil everything. They serve sandwiches, soups, main meals and desserts as well as good coffee.

Finally, I made my way to the Royal Palace, built by Ferdinand I in the 16th century for his wife Anna as a summer getaway. It's well preserved with a pretty garden and a steep walk up to the castle. Nowadays, it's used for exhibition space for

fine art. It was here I recognised the style of the dainty baby pink tea sets, with their signature bows designed by Linda Prochazka, a who I had met earlier in the day. I felt I was now more in tune with the whole design business.

Centrally located, Almanac X Alcron hotel once again partnered with Designblok and if you stay, you will see that it's the perfect match.

So many 'art' hotels appear to randomly display works with no apparent rationale.

At Almanac X Alcron, art is obviously important – the arresting painting in the bar and the muted modern art behind reception both testify – and the temporary art pieces blend in seamlessly around reception, in the bar and into the dining room.

There are vases and glasswork by Dechem & Michal Bacak and paintings by July Haluzova. In the bar, three artists have designed not only a cocktail each, but the glass in which it's served, produced by Qubus Studio.

A pop-up store with work from last year's People's Choice award winner – Linda Prochazka (Linda Pro) – is sited at the front of the hotel. This year's work 'I am not fragile' – I just want to be handled with care' features ceramic hearts.

I was also drawn to last year's work – glass mini handbags with bows. Assuming they would be used as ornaments, Linda told me they there was a craze among Gen Z for these accoutrements as bags. She



flooded with light from the floor-to-ceiling windows. I liked the Art Deco font that is still used for room numbers, and the crystal chandeliers in the dining room.

Rooms are unashamedly modern with clean lines – a living house plant and a couple of quirky lamps softening what could have been a corporate look.

The bathroom had his and hers sinks in sexy black, a good walk-in shower, a deep bath and surfaces and walls in local limestone. Floors are heated. Of special note are the organic toiletries, in refillable bottles sourced from Jimmy Boyd perfumer in Spain.

The hospitality provision at the hotel is particularly strong. The cosy bar has bags of character, with soft lighting and Art Deco nods. They mix great cocktails, at a price that won't make your eyes water.



explained that each glass piece can take up to a month to make as there are various stages involved. Her wonderful work is available online or you may go to see her at her studio.

Almanac X Alcron is a well-known landmark in Prague since opening in 1932. Built in the Art Deco style by a young architect, The Alcron was an immediate success. After a subsequent difficult history, it was finally bought by the Austrian family Haselbacher in 1995.

Refurbished – at a rumoured cost of €20 million – and renamed in 2023, it's the luxury hotel group's third hotel. Owner and chief executive Tina Haselbacher, a trained architect, was heavily involved in the transformation, which has preserved the best bits of the Art Deco design and added the modern touches that discerning guests expect.

The fabulous original staircase in Carrera marble is



Staying in the thick of London's West End means the show doesn't stop at the door

PARADING round my opulent, womb-like suite at L'Oscar Hotel, on busy Southampton Row, a stone's throw from Covent Garden and Leicester Square, I am in shock.

I've just received a phone call regarding some bad news, before I've even unpacked. I drop my bags of books and clothes, flumping myself on to the enormous bed.

I gaze at the red curtains and elaborate flock wallpaper, soaking it in. It's the kind of news that's impossible to act on for at least a few days, and none concerning death or marriage. So I decide to take the measured, holy approach and shower, unpack and glam before heading downstairs for a sturdy martini.

Complete with a glowing marble bar and twinkling candles, the atmosphere downstairs is ceremonial. Considering this was once a chapel and was reimagined as a hotel by Parisian architects, the serious feel makes sense.

I order a drink before leafing through some of today's finds – some art and theatre periodicals from Tate and Frieze, and well as some classic stage plays, and some maps from Cecily Court off Piccadilly.

Holborn is one of my favourite parts of London – it's where you can find the city's very best hotel bars, Asian food and bookshops, due to its close proximity to the theatres, Chinatown and esteemed auctioneers such as Sotheby's and Christie's.

My purchases were nabbed at the local Oxfam Bookshop, a prized locale for valuable and rare prints at cut-price – plus some great people-watching.

I can indulge in the latter at the hotel bar too, full of perfumed, evening attire-clad dates and theatregoers. A friend joins me.

As we wander the halls of the residence, I note the 'Edwardian freestyle' deep gold fixtures, heavy flock wallpapers, paintings and low lights. I discover it was in fact the London head-

An act of sense



BY ALEXANDRA PEREIRA

City chic: Covent Garden and, inset, a room at L'Oscar Hotel

quarters of the Baptist Church – though its modern designers have paid homage to the campy theatricality of the building's situation with plenty of detail such as butterfly taps, peacock motif doors and a trendy Venetian-inspired restaurant that offers an excellent pre-theatre fixe featuring the likes of beetroot soup, steak frites and sorbet.

After, I contemplate the day's events with a stroll across Covent Garden, sparkingly lit year-round, to one of my favourite theatres, the Donmar, where performances are always intimate and dynamic. You might also explore the offering at off-West End but still central spaces such as Reference Point.

I see a play that is inspiring as much as it is harrow-

ing, and mosey back via a friend's late night comedy show at Soho Theatre. Tempted as I am by the old pubs along the way back to my boudoir – The Cross Keys and Ye Olde Mitre serve decent pours with character – I stay sensible.

Bright and early I rise to drink tea and order eggs Florentine to my balcony, looking over the rooftops and steeples of Holborn, horns honking and birds tweeting as the day gets going. I tackle my news by putting pen to paper, writing the first line of my new play.

TRAVEL FACTS

Fly various Irish airports to London from €20 return, ryanair.com. Rooms at L'Oscar Hotel from €485, see loscardlondon.com.