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SAPA, VIETNAM

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Perched above a lush valley of rice paddies and mountains rises the spectacularly unique Hotel de la Coupole, member of the MGallery Hotel Collection. With its mesmerizing views and clouds floating below, architect Bill Bensley envisioned an innovative fusion: French Indochine meets haute couture meets hill tribe culture. It's a breath of fresh air.

Photography JÉRÔME GALLAND Text THUY DUONG



BILL BENSLEY

A prolific hotel designer who forgoes the ordinary, Bill Bensley is the man behind the magic of Hotel de la Coupole MGallery Collection. His projects, especially in South East Asia, are known for their redefined luxury and maximalist design and have extended the boundary of standard expectations of hotel design. His company Bensley is based in Bangkok and Bali and their goal is to produce outstanding projects without sacrificing the surrounding environment.

Bensley has also created a foundation, the Shinta Mani Wild, that aims to empower the local communities in which they build, through providing them with the tools to overcome adversity.



The Reception Desk.

The giant spools of traditional Vietnamese silk adorn the back wall of the Reception Desk, merging the idea of a French atelier and a local hill tribe workshop.



THE HOTEL DE LA COUPOLE

When Bill Bensley and his teams were asked to design the Hotel de La Coupole, it was the mix of the French colonial culture, the rice terraced mountains and the local ethnic minorities that were the source of his inspiration. The catalyst for the entire hotel, he says, was a find at a "marché aux puces" flea market in Paris: a 1920's vintage polka dot hat, placed on top of a typical Vietnamese hill tribe hat. "What a great thing to do" he thought, "to make an entire hotel from this idea: Vietnamese hill tribe, but French influence, at the turn of the century." The fusion of these two stories, the colorful local culture of the Dao and H'mong tribes in the region surrounding Sapa and French Haute Couture are present

everywhere, from the furniture to the walls, ceilings and floors.

Sapa was once the summer mountain retreat where the French executives came to escape the heat of Hanoi at the beginning of the last century. Enchanted by the cool climate, the richness of the local culture and the stunning views of terraced rice paddies turning golden during harvest season, they constructed a beautiful village in various yellow tones facing the valley. Nestled in the Hoang Lien mountains – a five-hour drive from Hanoi – it is home to many colourful hill tribes who still inhabit the traditional villages scattered throughout the mountains.

Entering the spectacular lobby, filled with old French travel trunks, vintage hats, dressmaker dummies along with large



spools of hilltribe silk, there is a dizzying multitude of detail present in every corner of the hotel. "I have been collecting specifically for this project for the last seven years," Bill says. "You don't have to use everything brand new... I've made a considered effort, to use, not hundreds but thousands of antiques gathered from all over the world, to tell the story of how the French worked with the Vietnamese when they were here. I love the idea of re-using old objects because they give a place a real feeling that you can't get with something that's brand new."

Bill's favourite areas of the hotel are the Absinthe Bar, located on the rooftop featuring unique artworks, antiques and a mirrored

ceiling made out of 3,600 hand scarified mirror tiles. As in all parts of the hotel, the furniture is custom made and showcases in every detail the fusion of the French Haute Couture and hill tribe culture. His other favorite is the Grand Bassin, a large heated swimming pool in the Art Nouveau style with emerald green marble pillars, pink chandeliers and a fountain. Giant paintings of bathing ladies and Olympian bronze sculptures in swimsuits surround the pool with an otherworldly feeling.

The exterior of the hotel is an homage to French Indochine-era architecture, with its yellow hues and resplendent domes, rooftop pavilions, romantically curved iron balconies, all reminiscent

of a Wes Anderson film. "Because this is a very big building, I wanted it to be broken down in scale, like the buildings that you would see in Paris," says Bill. Two wings divide the u-shaped hotel, with a glass covered garden down below letting in a soft light. High upon the roof, the two terraces are linked together by a narrow bridge that faces the green valley. An instagrammers paradise, it is undoubtedly the perfect spot to contemplate the terraced rice paddies, the steep mountains and the forests. A drink in your hand, your head in the clouds. All because of a polka dot hat. ●

hoteldelacoupole.com bensley.com

The Lobby.

The first thing that you will notice when entering the hotel are the floating hats and vintage travel trunks that sit proudly in the centre of the lobby, creating a fantastical dreamlike feeling and highlighting the traditional turn-of-the-century French way of life.

Velvet fabric upholsters the chairs in the lobby in effervescent shades of green and blue, scattered with cushions in traditional hill tribe pattern.

The Lobby.

The vaulted ceilings and large crittal windows create a sense of light and emphasise the colours throughout the lobby. The walls and floors are all decorated with accents of French and Vietnamese design and the Chinese style lanterns is a hint of the Chinese influence in the region. The pinks, blues and greens of the lobby coupled with all of the fashion motifs on the back wall emphasise the combination of haute couture and hill tribe inspirations.



The Lobby.

Velvet fabric upholsters the chairs in the lobby in effervescent shades of green and blue, scattered with cushions in traditional hill tribe pattern. From this corner of the lobby you can admire the hotel gardens and appreciate some of the more intricate design details, such as the sconces decorated with hill tribe tassels, and the tiles that are designed with detail from the traditional H'mong costumes.





The foot bridge.

Two wings divide the u-shaped hotel. High upon the roof, the two terraces are linked together by a foot bridge facing the green valley.

The Absinthe.

Upon entering the Absinthe bar, your eyes are automatically drawn to the old bamboo plants that surround the Palanquin in the centre of the room. Designer Bill Bensley said that he wanted the bar to feel like it had been rediscovered after many years of sitting untouched. The noble outfit in the centre of the room is the epitome of the fusion of fashion and local tradition and this feeling is present throughout the bar and in every design element, from the patterns of the floor to the details of the plush velvet chairs. 3,600 hand-scarified mirror tiles adorn the ceiling, made specifically to create an ancient appearance.



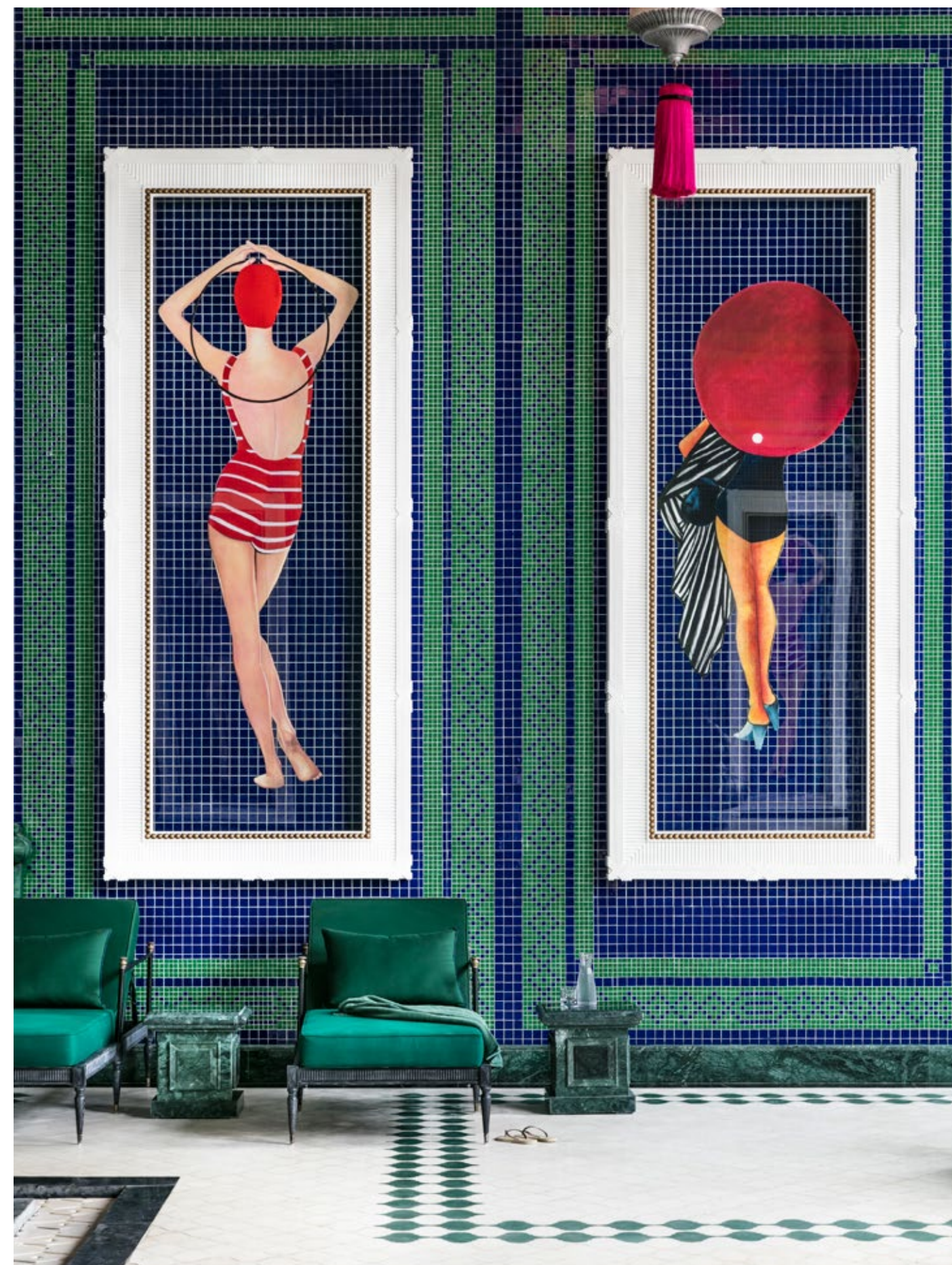


The Terrace.

Outside the restaurant Chic, a terrace is overlooking the Sapa Valley, the terraced rice paddies and the passing clouds. The fabrics covering the chairs are inspired by the patterns of the Red Dao tribe.

The Grand Bassin.

The elegant and indulgent indoor heated pool is one of the designer's favourite parts of the hotel. It highlights the glamour of the early 20th century with its emerald green tiling and painted ceilings, paired with murals of swimmers and divers that add charm and charisma to the space.



The Grand Bassin.

Bright murals of swimmers adorn the walls and windows around the heated pool, all of which were painted in Bensley's studio in Bangkok. The stark contrast of the black metal staircase leading up to the mezzanine, creates a dramatic effect that adds to the luxurious feel of the Grand Bassin itself.



The Grand Bassin.

There are bright pink chandeliers, statues of Olympic style divers cast in bronze and a faux ceiling depicting swimmers diving from above. The mosaic on the bottom of the pool is inspired by a traditional hill tribe pattern.



The Grand Bassin.

The opulent heated pool highlights the glamour of the early 20th century with its emerald green tiling and pink chandeliers, paired with statues of Olympic style divers cast in bronze.

The restaurant Chic.

The restaurant Chic harks back to a time of decadence and extravagance with French influences present throughout mixed with traditional patterns of the hill tribes. The porter chairs are designed in a traditional French shape, but combined with the rattan material, they become a mélange of French and Vietnamese inspiration.

The restaurant Chic.

The bamboo rattan chairs in the restaurant Chic encapsulate beautiful French porter style design with traditional materials and patterns. The tiling on the floor and the fabric on the cushions are also specifically designed to resemble the pattern of the costumes from the ethnic minorities in Northwestern Vietnam.



Executive suite bedroom.

The bedside lamp adorned with silver tassels is inspired by the festive dresses worn by tribes people around Sapa. Along with the color scheme and patterns of the Red Dao tribe, it contrasts brilliantly with the detailed fashion sketches that hang by the bed. The sketches themselves are all original drawings and magazine clippings collected by Bill Bensley on his travels over the last seven years.

Executive suite bathroom.

Exquisite tile design and details inspired by the patterns of the hill tribes in the spacious bathroom combined with the black and white decor and free standing bath create an exuberant feeling of opulence.



Presidential suite bedroom.
A lampshade with tassels and impressive colour contrast in keeping with the traditional colour scheme of the hill tribe scarf that can be seen on the chair.



Presidential suite bedroom.
Examples of H'mong tapestries influences can be found throughout the presidential suite bedroom with a mix of deep blue and bright pink patterns. The two large windows overlooks the valley with its terraced rice paddies.



Presidential suite bathroom.

Blue tones decorate the Presidential suite bathroom and a mannequin style lamp sits to one side that was specifically designed with a H'mong style headpiece, further accenting the fusion of French Haute Couture and Hill tribe tradition. The Chinese influences on the region are shown here in the form of a small iron trinket box.



The dome.

The impressive Coupole, meaning dome, of the restaurant Chic brings natural light to the dining area. It is reminiscent of the beauty of the French Indochina era of architecture.

The Cacao Café.

the high ceilings, the two vintage style ladders and mosaic details of the Cacao Café were inspired by French épiceries at the turn of the last century. On the mezzanine, piles of little boxes mirror the sense of excitement that a child may feel in a sweet shop. It offers a variety of freshly baked breads, high tea and macaroons.

**Haute Couture inspirations.**

Adorning the walls throughout the hotel are examples of old French fashion sketches, epitomising the fusion of French haute couture and traditional hilltribe design. There are thousands of these drawings, magazine clippings and sketches all over the hotel, and they were collected by Bill Bensley over the last eight years, a clear depiction of where his inspiration for the hotel came from.

THE HOTEL DE LA COUPOLE

The exterior.

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The terrace.

On top of the building, the terrace outside the restaurant Chic is overlooking the Sapa Valley, the terraced rice paddies and the passing clouds. The fabrics covering the chairs are inspired by the patterns of the Red Dao tribe.





The Funicular.

Opposite: This vintage style funicular can transport you directly from the hotel to the famous cable car station. From there you can ascend the highest mountain in Indochina, with the summit of Fansipan sitting proudly at 3,143m.

This page: view from the Cable car on the way up to mount Fansipan





The hill tribes.

A woman of the H'mong ethnicity, one of the main Hill tribes in the region, is weaving a tapestry made of hemp using a traditional method. It takes between several weeks and several months to complete a traditional costume.

ABOUT SAPA

Sapa is an area of natural beauty buried within the Hoang Lien mountains of north-west Vietnam; host to plentiful rice terraces, colourful hill tribes, and ideal for hiking. The best time to visit is during the harvesting season, in May and September, a time when all the hills glow a golden yellow from the ripe rice plantations.

Getting there: located five hours from Hanoi, opt for a private minibus to drive up to Sapa, or try a regular bus or even a night train.

RICE TERRACES

Sapa is home to some of the most beautiful rice terraces in Asia, and perhaps the world. You can organize a trek through the terraces, with views of scenic mountains, numerous waterfalls, crossing the hill tribes' villages nestled in the valleys. One of the most scenic valleys is Muong Hoa, and don't miss the Tram Ton Pass with its spectacular view over the valley and the rice paddies below.

HILL TRIBE VILLAGES

Each hill tribe in the region has its own culture and traditional language and are easily identified by their eclectic and colourful dress. The villages are sprawled out over the mountains, but are quite easy to visit from Sapa, the closest being the H'mong villages Cat Cat, Lao Chai and Ta Van.

FANSIPAN

Fansipan is the tallest mountain in Vietnam; known as the roof of Indochina, it sits proudly at 3,143m altitude. A cable car takes you right to the summit to admire the stunning views from the peak. A funicular from Hotel de la Coupole brings you to the base of the cable car. If you're in good shape, you can trek up the mountain on trips that range between one and four days.

SAPA MARKET

Two minutes away from Sapa town centre, the Saturday market is a meeting place of the Hill Tribe minorities gathering to sell their handicraft. There is a bustling atmosphere with everything from beautiful scarves, to noodles, to live animals on display. Arrive very early to avoid the crowds and immerse yourself in local Sapa lifestyle.

SAPA CHURCH

This French church built in 1895 and designed in the shape of a cross, is one of the remaining vestiges from the colonial period when Sapa was the summer getaway for the French during colonial times. The church and its grounds are now a place where many cultural activities, such as dancing and music, take place on a Saturday.

—Tori Sharp

