

FINANCIAL TIMES

An inexpensive design hotel in Paris

By Sophy Roberts

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The restaurant and bar area at Mama Shelter

When the general manager of the Hôtel Plaza Athénée, one of the most luxurious hotels in Paris, told me to take seriously an inexpensive new design hotel that's closer to the airport than the Eiffel Tower, I sat up and listened. And so the following night, I made my way from central Paris out to the 20th arrondissement to check out Mama Shelter, a 172-room hotel that opened last autumn in the Saint Blaise *quartier* near the Pere Lachaise cemetery. I booked a room for €99 – though travellers with changeable plans should note that reservations are 100 per cent non-refundable – and got ready to hate everything about being so far from my comfort zone. I was already questioning my decision when the cab ride from central Paris cost me some €20.

As it happens, the rue de Bagnolez isn't any old backwater. Yes, the neighbourhood is rundown, with bad housing and dusty pavements. It's within walking distance of the Périphérique (the capital's main ring road) so you certainly wouldn't want to hit the streets in the same wardrobe in which you might want to promenade the Champs-Élysées. But there's also an electrifying energy to this area.

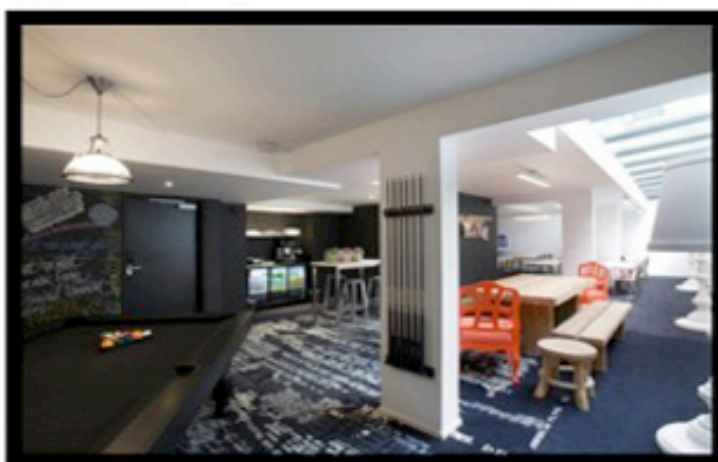
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The restaurant I went to that evening, Le Bistro Paul Bert, had been recommended to me by François Simon, Le Figaro's food critic; it turned out to be exceptional, inexpensive, and just a five-minute cab ride away. When I got back to the hotel after midnight, rue de Bagnole was hopping. Mama Shelter is opposite one of the hottest rock clubs in Paris, La Flèche d'Or, which occupies a disused railway station. The club was spilling out on to the street in a display of the kind of fresh, youthful Paris scene I had thought long gone.



A recreation area

At the same hour, the hotel's bar and restaurant teemed with what appeared to be a group of American musicians, along with businesspeople, and couples from Scandinavia, Spain and Germany. It was entirely exciting, for at no time during my stay were there signs of that museum-like greyness that can affect a city centre.

Mama Shelter has been seven years in the making: conceived by two of Serge Trigano's sons (Trigano founded Club Med) in partnership with Cyril Aouizerate, chief executive of Urbantech, a company that advises on urban restructuring projects, it has been designed by Philippe Starck, who first became known for his hotel work in the 1980s with Ian Schrager.

These days Starck's hand can be seen at work on hotels all around the world. It can sometimes seem as if a smattering of his staff can make an interior into a great hotel simply by virtue of the designer's reflected glory. But at Mama Shelter he surpasses expectations, creating something comfortable, purposeful and fun. Starck *belongs* to Paris, and you can tell. His eclecticism has genuine verve; it's urban and in synch with its locale. Ceilings in the open-plan bar and restaurant are covered in blackboard paint, with impromptu scrawls in chalk. The seating is a mishmash of chairs and tables – some metal, some wood, some leather, some sofa-like banquettes. There are books, televisions and iMacs scattered around the room, and an outside terrace that overlooks the railway track, with its graffiti.

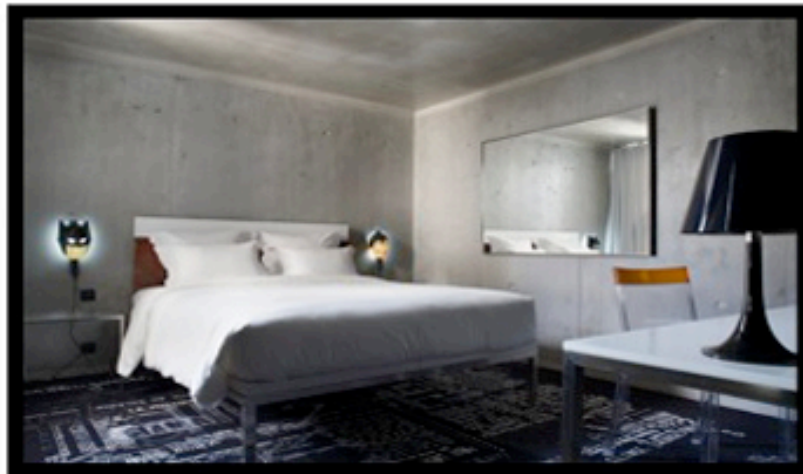
What I like about Mama Shelter is the fact it's neither too sharp, too clean, nor too clever, which is often the problem whenever the next "hot" design hotel tries to reinvent the wheel.

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One of its bedrooms

The rooms all have at least one wall of windows. I was staying in one of the cheapest available, at 17 sq metres, which was just large enough, with a queen-sized bed and a tangerine shower. You get silky sheets, comfy mattresses, free internet and an in-room vending machine for a mini-bar. A pity about the narrow desk; I also couldn't work out how to turn off the wall-mounted iMac.

But, for under €100, I'm not complaining. The staff are charming. And while there aren't enough of them to carry your bags, at least they apologise for keeping you waiting at check-out. On arrival, they will also reveal there's no room service. Most impressively, they're as unpretentiously attentive to me, a single traveller, as they are to the Americans and the nun dining on the next table at breakfast.

So while many will find the location frustrating, and the mood off-key, if you're used to the city's gilded palace hotels, there are others who will like it for an inexpensive and youthful Parisian weekend that has nothing to do with the city's beautiful if sometimes too familiar face.

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