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Designs on Greece

Mykonos has long been a favourite of the fashion crowd — and as **Sonia Purnell** discovered, few hotels pander to the beautiful set as much as the lavishly refurbished Belvedere

NOW if your idea of a summer holiday is chilling out in a faithful old pair of shorts, flip-flops and an M&S one-piece, forget the Belvedere hotel — or indeed, most places on Mykonos. The Greek island, a windswept but picturesque jewel in the Aegean, is one long fashion shoot, a 24-hour parade of beautiful bodies and sumptuous clothes lit by the famously flattering Mykonian sun by day and thousands of candles and lanterns at night.

No wonder the lavish refurbishment of the Belvedere — a favourite haunt of such couture luminaries as Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gaultier and Julien Macdonald — focuses not only on style but on storage. “We’ve made special drawers under our new beds so that our guests, especially the girls, have enough space for all their shoes,” co-owner Nikolas Ioannidis tells me as I stare down sheepishly at my past-it pair of sandals. It seems that even weekend guests at this chic boutique hotel pack enough footwear to give the Sex in the City gang a run for their money. Oh, how I wished I’d spent a week shopping before coming here.

Indeed, the entire place feels more downtown Manhattan — albeit overlooking the sea beloved by the ancient gods — than traditional Greece, with its rough-and-ready tavernas and mangy half-starved cats.

Mykonos Town’s tiny, twisting streets are a riot of designer shops selling most marques ranging from Victoria Beckham to Gucci, Patek Philippe to Diesel at eye-popping prices.

The crowd in town and at the Belvedere itself is a mixed bag of singles and couples and is impressively interna-

tional — French, Brazilian, Dutch, German, Greek, American — but frequently US-based. Many are in either fashion or interior design; actors, it seems, find the constant “life as a stage” vibe too much like work. Children barely feature — this is a strictly grown-up playground, and, despite the Mykonos stereotype, both straight and

gay. But nor, strangely, do Brits appear in any numbers either.

Mykonos may be seen as the Greek answer to Ibiza. Chic and hedonistic. But upscale nightlife Aegean-style centres around the fashionable bar rather than nightclub. And maybe Brits are just too addicted to dancing?

Anyway, at the Belvedere the posing — and therefore the hotel — centres around the pool and adjacent bar, which have both recently been revamped by New York architect David Rockwell, the style visionary behind Nobu (as well as

Gordon Ramsay’s Maze). In fact, the hotel is home to Nobu’s only outdoor restaurant in the world, known here as Matsuhisa and open only in the summer when the in-crowd fly in.

The great man himself visits regularly, delighted by the terraces overlooking the town and sea and festooned with both vivid bougainvillea and the most exquisitely delicate flower-strewn sunblinds. Even the marble used to make the sushi bar was chosen for its veining, which is reminiscent of Japanese cherry blossom. Around the pool, the

chunky teak sun-beds, agreeably dressed with terry slipcovers during the day, are each big enough to accommodate a small party and regularly do. I shuffled up when a smart New Yorker found herself without a spare lounge — and then spent the next hour in her

company wishing I had splashed out on a swimming costume at least half as on-trend as hers.

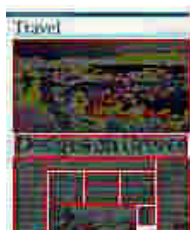
By night, they cleverly transform into additional seating for Matsuhisa and the other hotel restaurant which has just been taken over by the celebrated Australian-Greek chef George Calombaris, of Melbourne’s Press Club fame.

Nouveau Greek food, it turns out, offers many of our old favourites — souvlaki and baklava, for instance — but not in the way that is likely to preclude a designer bikini the next day (should you happen, unlike me, to have one). The meat is light as a feather, tasty but grease-free. The baklava oozed a sophisticated chocolate goo but was neither too sweet, heavy or cloying.

The pool and its surrounding bar and restaurants — like their many fans — dress for dinner. Every evening in the summer season — June to August — legions of white-clad staff spend as much time rearranging and redressing the furniture for the night-time fun as the guests spend time choosing what to wear (in other words, at least 60 minutes).

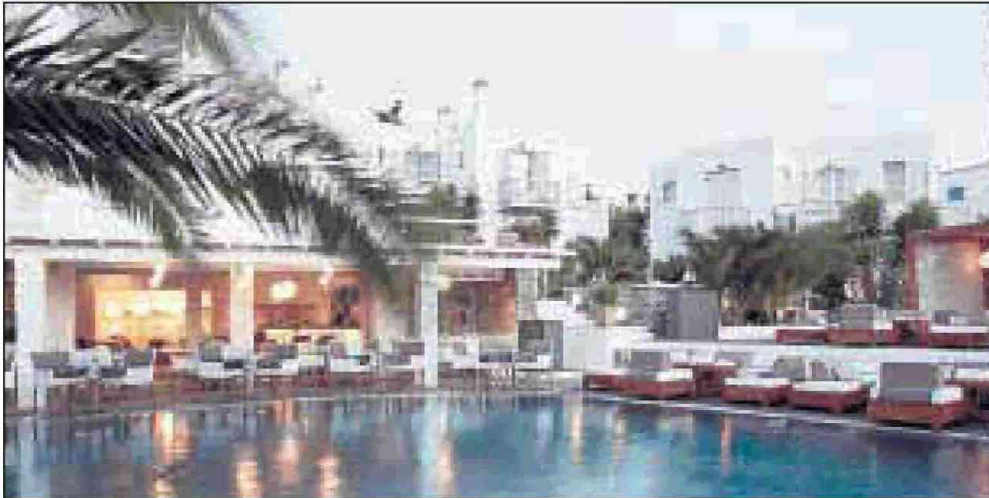
The sun-beds are ingeniously folded

CONTINUED ON: PAGE 57 ►



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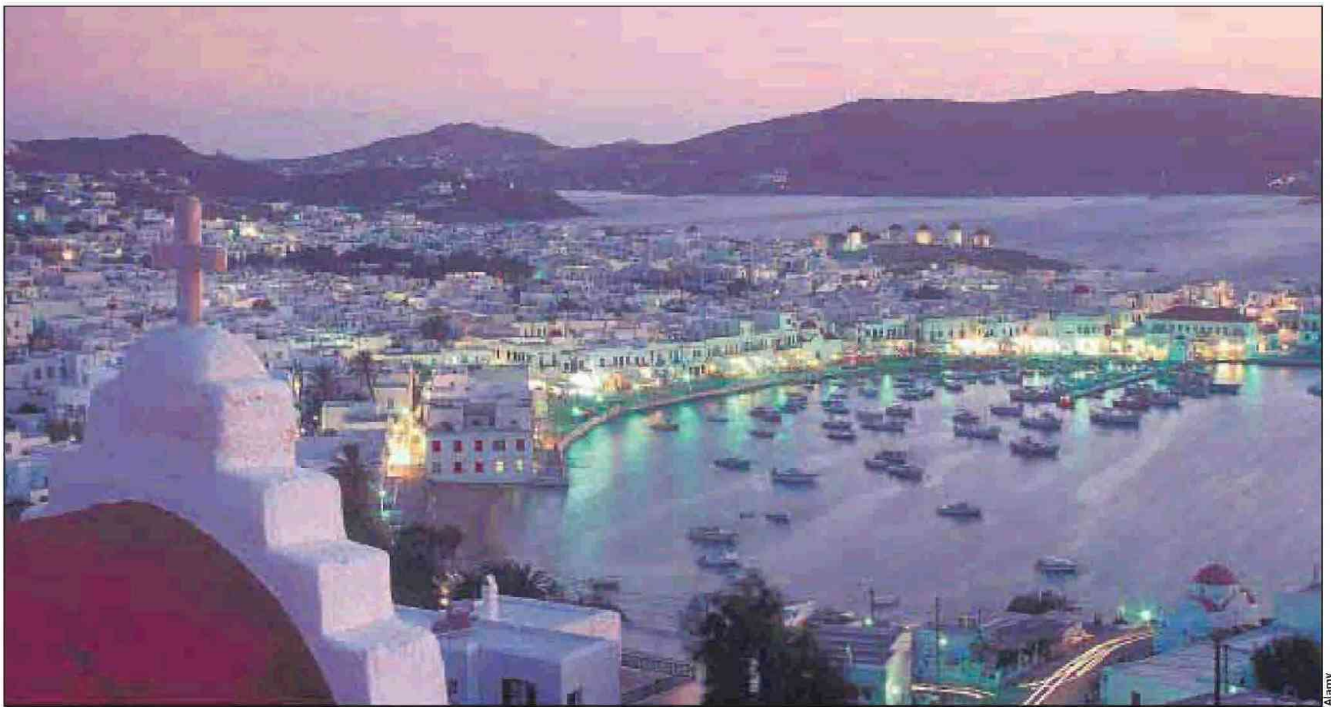
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All that glitters:
top, Mykonos Town
by night. Left, the
pool and bar at
the Belvedere,
revamped by New
York architect
David Rockwell

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into smart dining chairs, while the existing dining chairs from lunch are dressed with dapper little white and taupe jackets for a more formal look. Candles are lit, as are Rockwell's highly desirable outdoor signature chandeliers — adorable balls of white metal flowers that have proved so popular with guests that the hotel is thinking of selling them.

The Mykonos climate — despite its southerly position — does not always allow comfortable outdoor dining, however. The hotel has installed strategic glass windbreaks against the “melt-émi”, a fairly persistent northerly breeze that freshens the stultifying August sun but can be rather too fresh out of peak season.

Inside, the hotel has a deliberately cosy, sunken restaurant and bar area,

enclosed by beautiful walnut screens that resemble ripples and that has many of the stylish yet welcoming accents familiar to Nobu regulars. The walls shimmer with a mother-of-pearl effect, and there are plenty of cushions to loll on. The bar staff are top-notch — friendly, helpful and very cheerful.

This stylish hang-out is rather at odds with some of the rooms that continue to be dressed with rather clunky, dark furniture and have bathrooms with below-par toiletries. However, refurbishment has begun, masterminded again by Rockwell, that will see 46 rooms reduced to 39 rooms and suites. As a consequence prices (at least in high season) will rise substantially.

Instead of white and brown tiled floors (think Eighties Marbella) in the bedrooms, the new versions coming onstream from this month will be lined with grey-white marble floors punctuated by the odd shiny strip of hammered metal to catch the light. Bathrooms are going far more contemporary, with basins carved seamlessly out of marble — and the ubiquitous rainshower.

High-tech audio-visuals, climate control and lighting are being installed — so that, as Ioannidis puts it, “a guest's room can be ready for seduction at the flick of a switch with the right music,

lighting and ambience. We can even change the fabrics on the bed and cushions, add candles, drinks and flowers to make the right impression.”

When I saw the rooms, they were still devoid of personal touches such as curtains or beds so it was hard to see how successful they will be as seduction chambers. But as the Belvedere intends to charge €2,000 a night for the top-flight Belvedere suite, they'd better have got it right — for both parties. I think I would still be worrying about whether I'd brought enough shoes, however.

WAY TO GO

Hotel Belvedere (0030 22890 25 122, www.belvederehotel.com). Doubles from €235 room only (refurbished ones will be from €300 room only).

Easyjet (0905 821 0905, www.easyjet.com) flies directly to Mykonos from Gatwick, returns from £50.80.



Nobu style: walnut screens at the bar