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CAR
OF THE
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EDITOR'S LETTER



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Whisper it among *Top Gear*/*The Grand Tour* devotees, but Clarkson and co. didn't come up with the idea of racing cars against trains just for the thrills. The man who can be

credited with that ruse, Woolf Barnato—the free-spirited heir to a South African diamond-mining fortune—was putting pedal to metal about a century earlier. The de facto leader of the wealthy Le Mans-conquering motoring club the Bentley Boys, Barnato once bet £200 that he could set off from Cannes in his 6.5-litre Speed Six and reach his companion Dale Bourne's club in St James's, London, before Le Train Bleu even reached Calais from the same starting point.

It's an anecdote that illustrates, better than any I can think of, the powerful romance of motoring as an end in itself: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "journey, not the destination" adage, refashioned as a toast to the sheer hedonistic exhilaration that comes with propelling oneself from A to B using pedals connected to power trains.

It is Barnato and his friends' swashbuckling approach to motoring that our U.S. edition has rekindled, each year since 2003, with its Car of the Year event. This is where we invite *Robb Report's* readers and friends (we aim for our community to be both) to put the finest cars of the moment through their paces at carefully chosen locations, then crown winners based on criteria such as performance, agility, handling, comfort, and aesthetics.

Now, for the first time, the Car of the Year franchise has hit U.K. shores. A group of RRI clients travelled from the U.S. to join other friends of the

publication in tearing up the hallowed Tarmac of Silverstone in a fleet of nine carefully chosen vehicles, with other incredible activities showcasing British luxury at its best enjoyed either side of the track day (see page 48).

The Mercedes-AMG GT 63 4MATIC+ Premium Plus and the Bentley Continental GT Speed (a car that also prompted Viju Mathew to muse on the Bentley Boys' exploits—see page 60) both took podium places. But just as it did in our U.S. edition back in February, Aston Martin's DB12 (this time the Volante iteration) ran away with first prize, with one of our judges enthusing: "It's emotional. You've got to feel it to know it. The interior update has made it into the perfect car for everything a person could want." Our focus on the inaugural Car of the Year event begins on page 48.

Those with a more nostalgic yen for all things automotive can turn to page 86, where we visit the inaugural Oberoi Concours d'Elegance, an exploration that shows India's relationship with the automobile to be proud, passionate, and enriched by that country's unique cultural nuances.

Elsewhere in this issue, we visit Kimpton BEM Budapest (page 26)—the burgeoning hotel group's new European opening and Dutch designer Marcel Wanders's latest exercise in maximalist whimsy—as well as La Petite Maison's must-visit outpost on Mykonos (page 24). Rebecca Struthers, the first watchmaker in British history to earn a Ph.D. in horology, offers insights into her whims, wherefores, and love of watches in "The Answers" on page 30, and Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jossen explore Veuve Clicquot's new partnership with Venice Simplon-Orient-Express on page 20.

Would that last collaboration induce Woolf Barnato to swap Tarmac for tracks? I wouldn't put money on it. In those days they probably swigged their favourite tipples behind the wheel anyway.

As for Car of the Year becoming an annual U.K. extravaganza, that's a far safer bet than the one Barnato made on the Côte d'Azur in 1930—and he was sipping G&Ts in St James's while Le Train Bleu was still trundling away near the Belgian border.

Enjoy the issue, and thanks for being part of the journey.



Court of Lore

Hungarian mythology dominates an audacious design ethos at the latest jewel in Budapest's hospitality crown.

Dutch interior designer Marcel Wanders is on a mission: to “trash” (his word) what he refers to as—his words again—the “ignorant, the unthoughtful, the lazy, and the tired use of white walls and under-inspired minimalism.”

To see those uncompromising sentiments in fruition, check out Wanders's Swiss-themed whimsy at Kameha Grand Zurich (think Toblerone-shaped sofas, giant cowbell light fixtures, and bank-vault minibars) or visit the Mondrian Doha, with its giant white tree sculptures, psychedelic arabesques, and intricately patterned four-storey helical staircase. Picture *Arabian Nights* reimagined by Lewis Carroll and you'll get the idea.

The latest battle in Wanders's war on uncluttered banality was converting a 19th-century mansion (and former school) in Budapest's old town into the latest European outlet in the Kimpton hotel group's burgeoning portfolio. His main source of inspiration? Hungarian myths and legends.

“Folklore offers a rich tapestry of symbols and narratives that are both timeless and deeply evocative,” he tells *Robb Report U.K.* of his design ethos for Kimpton BEM Budapest, which opened in July. “The Hungarian legend of the Golden Stag and the Turul Bird, for instance, embodies themes of guidance, destiny, and the connection between the earthly and the divine—these elements resonate universally.”

A resin-cast statue of said mythical stag, enclosed in its own foliage-filled tubular conservatory, is at the focal point of a spacious lobby whose bold parquet floor is strewn with furniture by Wanders's brand Moooi. Flanking the space are bookshelves sprinkled with local paraphernalia and recessed wallpaper frescoes, depicting the stag and its avian companion in celestially themed scenes set within the city's distinctive architecture and surrounding topography. A bulbous, altar-like check-in desk is encrusted with tiles in patterns inspired by Hungarian Art Nouveau mosaicist Miksa Róth, as are the ovoid podiums on either side of it.

Also on the ground floor, Bar Huso—named after a seven-foot beluga sturgeon that, according to local mythology, resides in the Danube—takes its inspiration from this part of Budapest's rich fishing heritage, with patrons sipping their curated Hungarian beers, wines, and spirits among yet more visual depiction of Hungarian fables, this time encased within giant wall-mounted fish eyes. (Check out, too, the huge bronze ceiling panel, textured to look like it's dripping with rain.) A second bar option, Fennen—a conservatory-style structure on the hotel's

verdant rooftop—is another fine setting in which to enjoy Cuban cigars, aged rum, and Japanese whisky.

The 127 guest rooms—reached via corridors whose walls are a silky re-creation of giant book spines, gently illuminated by cloche lamps, also by Moooi—feature rich green, blue, or red colour schemes rendered in elaborate floral motifs, juxtaposed with modern surrealist artworks and, in the case of the 11 suites, freestanding bathtubs and expansive balconies. The Observatory Suite (about £4,200 per night) has a connecting 82-square-metre furnished rooftop terrace, while the Presidential Suite (about £8,460 per night) offers a large private outdoor terrace overlooking the Danube and can be divided into two interconnecting suites on request.

Wanders is prolific when it comes to luxury-brand collaborations (Louis Vuitton, Bill Amberg, and Baccarat are on his CV), and here he has enlisted Parisian brand Balmain to provide bathroom products, while cutlery and crockery in the restaurant Agos are sourced from Alessi.

The restaurant is another major draw. Executive chef Attila Feher—who has worked as a sous chef at the Savoy and alongside Wolfgang Puck at this city’s Matild Café & Cabaret—deftly alloys Mediterranean cuisine with local fare. (Opt for smoky tuna carpaccio, venison Wellington, wild-boar goulash, and Black

Forest cake if you’re after a single-visit synopsis of what the bustling open kitchen offers.)

Other plusses include a small but well-appointed wellness zone with gym, hot tub, sauna, and steam room; a three-storey underground garage with electric charging options; and the hotel’s location on the Buda banks of the Danube, close to the Unesco World Heritage–designated Castle District as well as the Fisherman’s Bastion, Matthias Church, Chain Bridge, and Budapest’s legendary Turkish baths.

But it’s the design ethos—one that “ensures the guest experience is rich in cultural resonance and historical depth,” according to Wanders—that is dominating the conversation with this opening. One can only speculate how tricky it was to accommodate Wanders’s vision within the constraints imposed by the building—a task the hotel’s general manager Attila AE Domby, who has just moved from London back to his native city to be a part of the launch, describes as “both a challenge and a privilege,” adding: “My aim was to ensure a perfect balance between Marcel’s outstanding design, the ownership’s stylish approach, and the operational logistics.”

As for Wanders’s ongoing mission, that takes us into altogether more quixotic territory: “I hallucinate and dream of a world, a design, a philosophy that truly builds on love, that builds on creativity, that builds on fantasy,” he says. **N.S.**

This page, clockwise from top right: The stag is prominent in both Hungarian mythology and the Kimpton BEM Budapest’s lobby (opposite page); domed conservatories are dotted throughout the premises; a private dining area; the restaurant Agos.

