

# HOTELSEEKER

Expert reviews of the world's great places to stay

## FIRST LOOK

# Romance – at last – on Monkey Island

*Her wedding night didn't exactly get off to a swinging start here, but four decades later*

*Fiona Duncan finds there is much to love*

I've been here before... just once, for one night, nearly 41 years ago. It had been a trying day. I remember my little cousin asking why I was dressed in a nightie as I descended the stairs and was handed my bouquet. She was a blunt kid. "I can see that you'd like to get married," she had pronounced earlier, "but why him?"

While my new husband slept, I sobbed silently into my pillow

**FOR BETTER OR WORSE**  
Fiona Duncan and her husband at their wedding, below, and 41 years later, far right



lost and had a row. Dinner was a disappointment (Monkey Island was in decline by the late Seventies) and we both felt deflated. There was a bottle of champagne in our room. I drank it and, while my new husband slept, I phoned my mother in a whisper and sobbed silently into my pillow. It was obvious I had made a terrible mistake.

Monkey Island probably got its name from 12th-century monks who fished here, and it was certainly raised up and given a solid base with rubble from the 1696 Great Fire of London. In 1723, the Duke of Marlborough bought the fish-shaped island as a fishing retreat, and it was he who built the Palladian Grade I-listed Temple and Pavilion that stand today.

Attached to the Temple are the hotel's now luxurious bedrooms (there are other Barn rooms and cottages for groups on the inland river bank) and on the first floor of the Temple itself is the marvellous, light-filled Wedgewood Suite, whose original plasterwork ceiling, resplendent with shells, mermaids and dolphins, is rather like a wedding cake. If we'd stayed here on our wedding night I might not have been such a pain. With windows on all sides, the walls are panelled in oak and above the mantelpiece is a portrait of the Duke of Marlborough at Monkey Island. It's one of the most memorable rooms I've ever slept in.

No less memorable is the Pavilion's Monkey Room, now the bar, its ceiling painted in fashionable 18th-century singeries: scenes of monkeys acting as humans, here fishing and shooting. Attached to the Pavilion is the hotel's low-ceilinged, open-kitchen restaurant and bar, with a lovely terrace overlooking the river.

In the late 19th century, Monkey Island became an inn and a popular lunch spot. Visitors included Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, Dames Clara Butt and Nellie Melba, Edward Elgar, who composed his Violin Concerto here, and HG Wells and Rebecca West, whose first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, is partly set on Monkey Island. When music- and fun-loving kit and Maggie Reynolds bought the estate in the Sixties, it had another heyday: now Princess Margaret, scores of parents of pupils at nearby Eton, and plenty of well-known names strolled across the footbridge.

And then decline set in. But Monkey Island was to be rescued by the modern equivalent of an 18th-century duke: a billionaire businessman, Malaysian Yeoh Tiong Lay – owner of about 35 hotels worldwide, including the Gainsborough in Bath, through the YTL hotel arm at Monkey Island, fell for it and decided it had to

**A SENSE OF PLACE**  
Monkey Island Estate, main; the Wedgewood Suite, below left



join the collection. He died in 2017, but a (very large) statue of him seated under a tree in the garden reminds us of the estate's latest owner.

Millions, needless to say, have been spent on the latest incarnation. This small, 41-bedroom, quirky property has acquired a big-brand feel. It has all the ingredients of a grand hotel, in miniature: notably good (sensible, British, full of flavour) food from William Hemming, ex-head chef of Simpsons in the Strand, polished and professional key staff and glossy interiors from New York-based Champalimaud Design. "We wanted to give the hotel a sense of place," I was told by one of their team.

They haven't. Surveying the swanky furnishings, I reckon I could be anywhere in the world, and can't help wishing that the Pigs' Robin Hutson, Olga Polizzi, who created Endsleigh, or a similarly imaginative independent hotelier had got their hands on Monkey Island. This version is classy all right, but it does not reflect the quirky character of the property.

grounds are filled with walnuts, chestnuts, limes, shrubs, flowers and lawns, and the gentle Thames provides constantly changing interest. A really wonderful addition is the Floating Spa, in a specially built riverboat moored along the bank. The treatment rooms are in cabins, the therapists wear nautical outfits and the whole "spa journey", using tinctures and liqueurs once made by monks, is a soothing, unusual, unpretentious delight. It's the sense of peace that's so alluring at Monkey Island, despite the

## FIVE OF THE BEST BOUTIQUE HOTELS IN PORTO

### 1. PORTO A S 1829 HOTEL

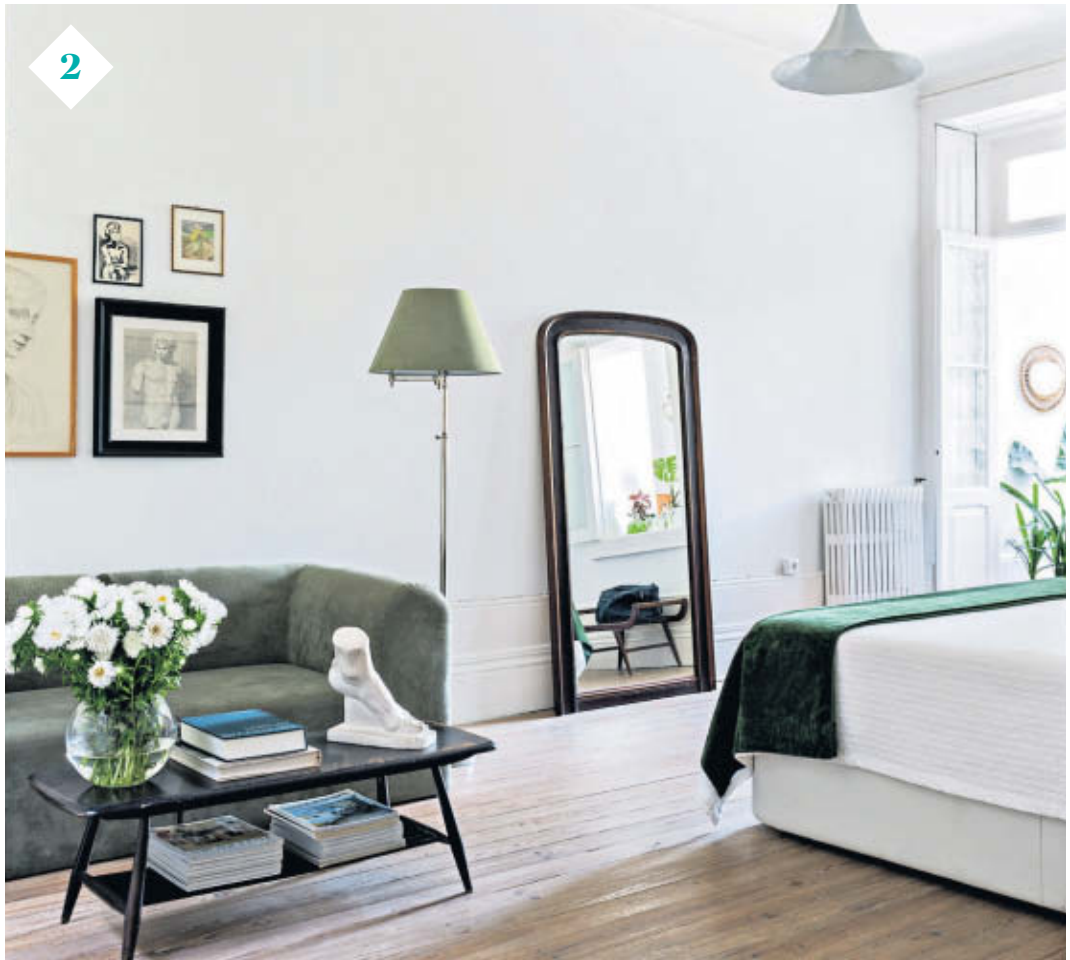
One of Europe's oldest stationery shops has been converted into a modern yet cosy hotel in the heart of downtown. Artefacts from the former Araujo & Sobrinho store (which still exists in an upmarket, scaled-down form next to the reception) add to the hotel's stylish interior design. Staff are laid-back and friendly. In the 41 rooms, wooden floorboards merge with vintage tiles and rotary dial telephones add old-school quirks. In 309, for example, a shabby-chic look has been created with a distressed bedhead, retro armchair and free-standing pastel pink bathtub. **Doubles from £76; telegraph.co.uk/tt-as1829**

### 2. MYHOMEINPORTO

This elegant three-room guesthouse is the kind of house you wish you lived in yourself. A Thirties townhouse has been converted into a charming space with plenty of personal touches, including family heirlooms, personal mementoes, large vases brimming with fresh flowers and well-chosen pieces of art. Bedrooms are large, light and tranquil, with white walls, stripped wood floors and squashy sofas. The Green Room at the back of the house is the pick of the bunch. The garden is a good spot to enjoy generous breakfasts. Fruit and yogurt, a freshly baked cake, a hot dish that changes daily, fresh bread and home-made jams make it quite the spread. **Doubles from £120 (two-night minimum); telegraph.co.uk/tt-myhomeinporto**



**3. TOREL 1884**  
Torel 1884 is set in an elegant 19th-century palace that has retained its grandeur – think high ceilings, spacious rooms, original staircases, vast windows and an elegant crowning skylight. The decor makes use of natural colours such as sand, terracotta, olive green and deep blue that let the architectural splendour reign. The 12 rooms and suites are large and most have bathtubs. The hotel has a 32-seat wine bar/



restaurant, which serves tapas-style sharing plates for lunch and dinner. **Doubles from £103; telegraph.co.uk/tt-torel1884**

**4. GUEST HOUSE DOURO**  
Guest House Douro might look familiar, as it forms part of a colourful collection of riverside buildings that regularly feature in postcard shots of Porto. As well as being part of a Unesco World Heritage site, it offers warm and relaxed service that

unsurprisingly attracts many return visitors. Although located in a historic house, the building has been completely refurbished with a modern and understated design. Each room has its own colour scheme, and simple bedheads, cushions and artwork tastefully decorate the rooms. Staying in this accommodation is akin to staying as a guest in the owners' home. **Doubles from £113; telegraph.co.uk/tt-guesthousedouro**

**5. M MAISON PARTICULIÈRE**  
A mother-and-son team has taken the concept of a five-star hotel and applied it on a small scale to create personalised luxury in central Porto. The hotel is a clever redesign of a 16th-century house and is located on one of Porto's most beautiful streets. After being buzzed into the elegant reception area, where a chandelier hovers above a studded lounge suite, the bustle of the street immediately

disappears and, come nightfall, burning tea lights add to the ambience. There's no such thing as a standard room, with each of the 10 suites carrying a unique layout and design – one has a private patio, while another has a magnificent wood-carved ceiling. **Doubles from £184; telegraph.co.uk/tt-maisonparticuliere**

For more hotels in Porto, see [telegraph.co.uk/tt-portalhotels](http://telegraph.co.uk/tt-portalhotels)

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4★ KYRIAD PRESTIGE  
HOTEL CALANGUTE

This contemporary hotel offers good guest facilities with a range of amenities. Ideally situated in the heart of the popular coastal town of Calangute, a short walk leads directly to the lively centre, lined with restaurants and bars.

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