



New Orleans

Trade secret

Fred Bernstein celebrates the birth of 'boutique' in a city of the quaint and conventional

THERE'S ONLY ONE thing wrong with this hotel: a name that makes it sound like a youth hostel. But the owners came by the moniker honestly: their turn-of-the-century building once housed offices for foreign trade organisations, hence International House, chiselled above the front entrance. The hotelier Sean

Cummings bought the property three years ago and began casting his spell behind the proud granite façade. The result is a hotel that would be welcome in any city, but is nothing short of a god-send in New Orleans. Until now, visitors had two choices: quaint lodgings in the French Quarter, which are lovely but, like caviar and bonbons, not right for every occasion; or monstrous, business-convention hotels that buoy the economy but diminish the city by towering over the Quarter, destroying the illusion that you've been transported to another era. The jazz-and-jambalaya capital cried out for something sensuous but not saccharine, crisp but not combative. Cummings' creation looks good in pictures – but would it stand up to the scrutiny of a design junkie? The lobby bears such an appealing combination

of textures and tones (mostly whites, browns and beiges) that you'll find yourself examining furniture to find out how to create the effects at home. Touches such as the marble floor covered with sisal rugs, the palmetto leaves emerging from handmade curlicue sconces, and the back-lit wrought-iron-and-frosted-glass front desk suggest a sophisticated design mind at work. This is just as evident in the 119 rooms, where jazz plays softly on the bedside CD players, original black-and-white photos of local musicians decorate the walls, and a range of surfaces (from taupe velvet headboards to crinkled paper lampshades) create a visual, and tactile, feast. Blanche Dubois would have appreciated the soft lighting and Aveda-laden bathrooms.

There's a modest gym, a smart gift shop and a chic bar called Loa, which is lit by hundreds of candles. At the time of my visit, Lemon Grass, the hotel's French-Vietnamese bistro, was still under construction (due to open this summer), but after noticing Christino's from my second-floor windows, I walked the 20ft or so to what turned out to be one of the city's best new restaurants (00 1 504 571 7500; open daily 6.30am–10pm). From there, I had a clear view back into my room – which suggests you might want to stay on a higher floor (there are 12), especially as five upper-level rooms have terraces overlooking the city.

International House is between the Quarter and the convention district, on a street that boasts stunning Victorian buildings. Like the hotel, the area is a much-appreciated middle ground. **1**

The appealing modern style of this New Orleans hotel fits neatly between that of the old French Quarter and the city's large business hotels



International House 221 Camp Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70130, USA (00 1 504 553 9550; fax: 200 6532; www.ihhotel.com). Double rooms cost \$139–\$269; penthouse suite \$279–\$399