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The Columbus Monaco. General manager, Fredrik Aspegrèn, has been named as the principality's hotelier of the year.

CREDIT: COLUMBUS MONACO

Leather helps 'old slipper' win award

For an outsider, Fredrik Aspegrèn is doing extremely well. A few weeks ago, the Monaco Hotel Industry Association named him as the principality's hotelier of the year for 2008 in recognition of the work he has done as general manager of the Columbus Hotel, an establishment owned by Scottish Formula One driver David Coulthard.

Mr Aspegrèn is winning a reputation as a creative visionary for the luxury hospitality industry, and leather features prominently in that vision.

Born in Spain to parents from Sweden, he has spent his whole professional life in the hospitality industry. He studied at the Ecole Hôtelière in Lausanne before beginning his professional career in Switzerland and Sweden. Soon, he moved to the Meadowood Hotel Resort in St Helena in California's Napa Valley before moving to open his own restaurant in Cape Town, South Africa, where he spent some 15 years.

He has explained that it was the opportunity to develop a hotel brand that drew him back to Europe, and the award from the hotel association would seem to suggest that he is on course for achieving that.

In conversation, he plays down the importance of the accolade, preferring to point instead to comments guests have made after staying at the Columbus. They have written letters to him and to Monaco's tourist authorities to compliment the hotel and the people who work there. Fredrik Aspegrèn has close ties with the authorities and is keen to keep working with them to help them build Monaco up as a destination in the niche market of luxury hospitality. The principality, with its marina, its casino, its beaches and its tax regime, is well established as a place that knows how to look after wealthy people, but under no circumstances should it stop working on its image, launching new venues and new attractions, he says.

The general manager of the Columbus wants his hotel to contribute to this and to be "a real plus" to Monaco as a destination, and creative use of leather in the hotel's interior is one of the major factors.

"In general, my philosophy is that the hotel has got to feel like an old slipper," he explains. "When you come in here, you just feel good, and you may not know why. You have to calm your client down. Travelling is stressful, and there are usually a lot of things going through people's minds when they arrive. One of the ways in which I address that is to make sure there is no luggage in the reception area; I hate luggage in the lobby with an absolute passion."

At the Columbus, he continues, you walk into "a club", meaning that the hotel entrance has the atmosphere of a stylish private club like the ones London is famous for. This is in fashion in luxury interior design projects all over the world at the moment and is inspiring widespread use of leather in wall and flooring panels.

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Leather enhances the atmosphere in the Columbus, too, most notably with the crocodile skin in the reception counter. The same skins produce a remarkable effect in the interior of the elevators, too, prompting one guest to say that the elevators were one of the aspects of the hotel that he liked best, commenting: "I love these elevators; they make me feel like I'm inside my wallet."

The crocodile leather is in warm brown tones, which works well with the different lighting combinations that the team at the Columbus uses to strike the right mood depending on the time of day. And its practical qualities of being sturdy, but soft and easy to clean are also part of the appeal of leather for the award-winning hotelier.

There are more traditional uses of leather in seating throughout the public areas of the hotel, including sumptuous armchairs in the hotel's conference suite, which would not look out of place in the first-class cabin of an aircraft. In the bars, a variety of earthy colours, light and dark, appear in the leather of seat-backs and cushions, contrasting with, and complementing, the wood in the tables and on the floors.

There are also leather touches in the bedrooms, with the material featuring in chunky panels in headboards.

All of this combines to give the old-slipper effect, making the Columbus, in Mr Aspegrèn's opinion, unique. "The Côte d'Azur has a reputation for elitism and a certain arrogance," he says. "But, here, that's all gone. This is the only hotel I can think of in which you could see a Lord and Lady in dinner dress drinking a dry martini, mixing with a plumber from Manchester drinking a beer. That's down to the people who work here. The welcome doesn't stop at the reception desk, but it follows guests all the way through and they write to us, and to the principality to compliment the fantastic attitude of the staff here. They're genuinely nice people, and it's wonderful to see what guests write about them."

For this reason, he dedicates his award to the entire team, but, when pushed, admits that, having only been in Monaco for three-and-a-half years, he's excited and delighted to have been named its top hotelier.









Leather abounds throughout the Columbus–sumptuous leather seating in the conference suite; headboards in the hotel bedrooms and dark bovine upholstery and lighter coloured seats to complement dark wood tables in the hotel's bars.

CREDIT: COLUMBUS MONACO