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## THE GOLD LIST 2018

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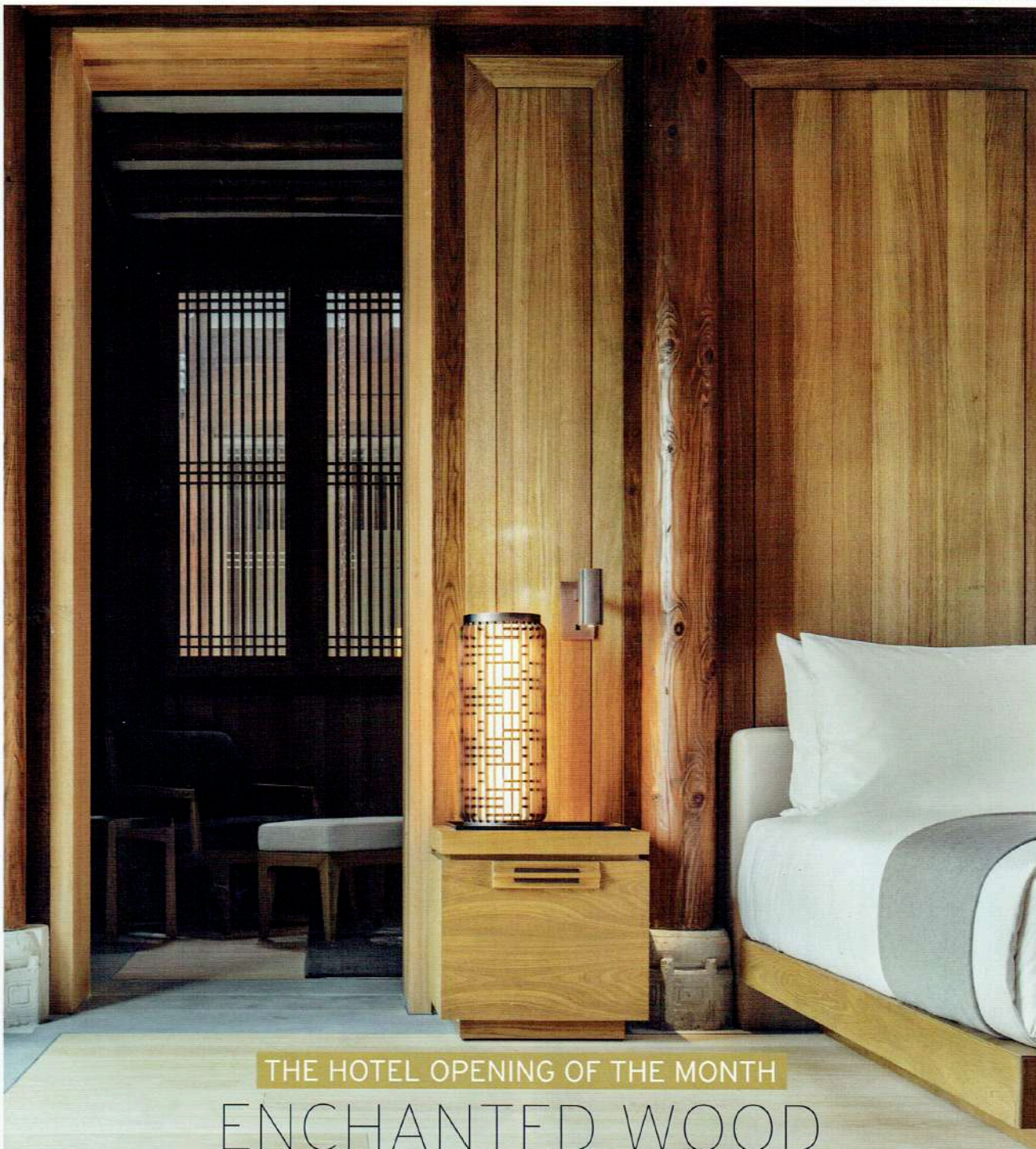
PLUS OUR ALL-TIME FAVOURITE PLACES TO STAY



# WHERE TO STAY

## SMART UPDATES ON OUTSTANDING PLACES

EDITED BY PETER BROWNE

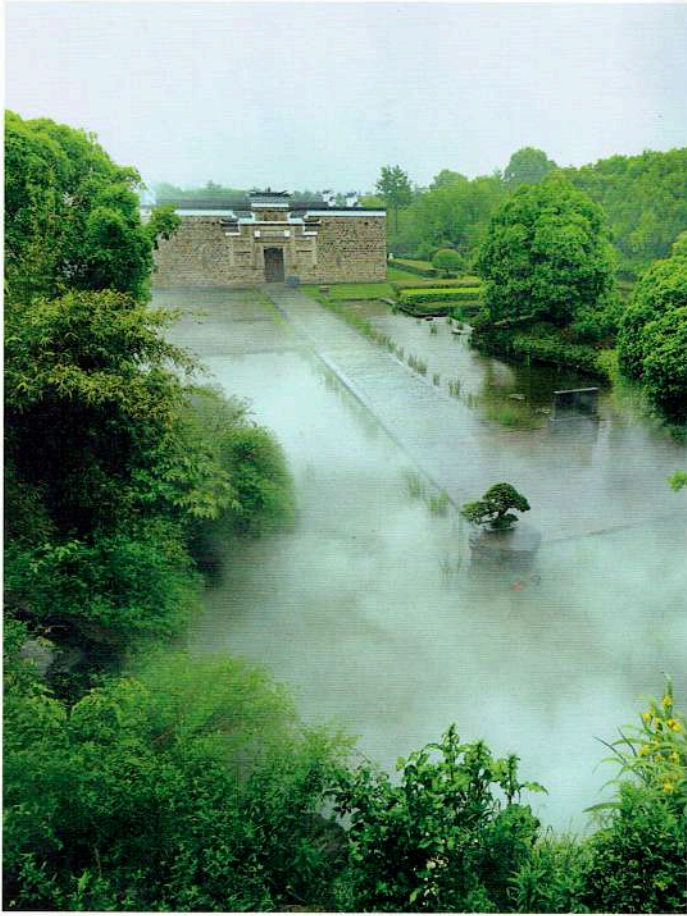


THE HOTEL OPENING OF THE MONTH

## ENCHANTED WOOD

AMAN HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING ONE OF THE MOST EXCEPTIONAL HOTEL GROUPS AROUND. SO HOW DOES A THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD CHINESE FOREST FIT INTO ITS LATEST PROJECT?

BY STEVE KING



'A CULTURE IS NO BETTER THAN ITS WOODS,' WH Auden declared. I am inclined to agree, though I wonder whether, in his flush of pleasure at having produced such a tidy epigram, the tree-hugging poet was giving short shrift to those cultures that, through no fault of their own, have had to make do without an abundance of greenery.

China, of course, still has plenty, if not as much as it used to. In 2002 the government began work on a dam in Jiangxi Province, a part of the country with forests of camphor trees, some more than a thousand years old. With the construction of the dam, these would be lost.

A young businessman named Ma Dadong, born in Jiangxi but living in Shanghai, returned home at about this time to visit his parents. Though only 28, he had already made a fortune in real estate. Distressed by what he saw, and the prospect of what was to come, he struck a deal with the government and

the art, architecture and material culture of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and of the majesty of trees. It is also a ravishing 21st-century hotel. Australian architect Kerry Hill has done a fine job of creating contemporary spaces that complement the old buildings without overwhelming them. His sheer, monochrome surfaces and clean, geometric lines are severe but harmonious – Mingimalism, you might call it. Apart from size, there is little variation among the 13 villas and 12 residences, which combine elements of old and new in precisely the manner of Mr Ma's experimental house. The 24 suites, the restaurants and bars and spa, which were unfinished at the time of my visit, are all new.

The nerve centre of Amanyangyun is Nan Shufang, the largest of the reconstructed buildings, named after a library in the Forbidden City. (The name of the hotel is likewise taken from an inscription in the City and means 'the nurturing of clouds'.) Originally a school, Nan Shufang is a school once more,

## THE ORIGINAL HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH PRECIOUS OBJECTS, AND WHAT BEGAN AS A TIME CAPSULE BECAME SOMETHING MORE, A JEWEL BOX, EXQUISITE YET PRACTICAL

made arrangements to remove 10,000 of the trees, along with 50 Ming and Qing Dynasty village buildings, that would otherwise vanish underwater. These were uprooted or disassembled and transported more than 700km to the outskirts of Shanghai. Mr Ma was not sure what he would do with his curious acquisitions. He just knew that he did not want them to disappear beneath a vast artificial lake.


In 2005, as an experiment, he enlisted a team of specialists to reassemble one of the houses, stone by stone, piece by piece. Electricity, plumbing, underfloor heating and so on were installed beneath the internal courtyards, the stone carvings and reliefs, the soaring pillars and mighty beams. Mr Ma filled the house with furniture, antiques and precious objects. What began as a time capsule became something more, a jewel box, exquisite yet practical. Outside were ornamental ponds, paved pathways, a small lake, dense wooded borders.

In 2009 he hosted a dinner at his experimental house. Among the guests was Adrian Zecha, the hotelier whose Aman portfolio had rewritten the high-end hospitality rulebook. What, Mr Ma asked Mr Zecha, do you think I should I do with these treasures? Disperse them? Make of them a museum or public monument? No, no, Mr Ma, said Mr Zecha. You must make of them an Aman.

Which is exactly what he has done, on land adjacent to that first experimental house. (During the interval, the Aman brand changed hands; it was sold to Vladislav Doronin, a Russian billionaire, in 2014.) The result, Amanyangyun, is a celebration of

where hotel guests can immerse themselves in the pastimes of the Chinese literati. There are classes in tea making, calligraphy, painting, music and incense appreciation. If this sounds simple, even predictable, perhaps it is. But it is also a serious attempt to remind guests of the tremendous richness of China's imperial culture. And I defy anyone to step into that beautiful, immaculate space and breathe in the perfume of centuries-old timber and not fail to be moved.

I was told that Mr Ma is a shy, private, modest man. I had looked forward to speaking with him during my visit to Amanyangyun but our meeting was cancelled. I saw him, briefly, leaving his experimental house, a slight, boyish figure in ordinary clothes pursued by a frantic toy poodle called Mia. Well, I thought, as Mia's barks receded, a pity we could not exchange a few words, but good on you.

Meanwhile, there is a lovely moment in some video footage shot when work on the dam in Jiangxi was under way. 'Farewell, great spirit,' a villager says solemnly to one of the magnificent old trees that Mr Ma had rescued and which now dignify the grounds of his extraordinary new hotel. 

Ampersand Travel (+44 20 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) offers a five-night stay at Amanyangyun from £5,325 per person, based on two sharing on a B&B basis, including return international flights and transfers, and selected cultural activities