

Travel + LUXURY



ROOMS WITH VIEWS

The world's latest and greatest luxe lodgings

MADRID ON THE MOVE
Spanish renaissance

GILDED GLAMOUR
Gold Coast glow-up

HELLENIC HOTSPOTS
Neo-classics in Greece

AMALFI REBOOT
Italy's It hotel



BRIGHT SPARK
Kit Kemp in the living room of her exuberant London residence.

HAUTE HOTELIER

Kit and wisdom

As the acclaimed founder and creative director of Firmdale Hotels, with eclectic properties in London and New York, Kit Kemp champions whimsy, art and craftsmanship. Little wonder she seeks the same qualities when she's travelling.

What makes a stellar hotel?

"Design that captures your imagination with an intelligent theme running throughout. Whether the design is modern or traditional, rooms should feel restful and guests should feel they never want to leave."

Do you have a favourite among your own?

"No. They're like my children. There are elements in each I love. At Charlotte Street Hotel in London I love the references to the Bloomsbury group. At Covent Garden Hotel, it's the English theatricality, while The Soho Hotel has a buzzy media and film atmosphere. At Haymarket, it's the sculptural quality of the spaces against the references to John Nash – the architect who developed most of Regency London, including Buckingham Palace. In New York, Crosby Street Hotel is all about urban chic and a mad dog theme."

And one from outside the Firmdale network?

"My husband, [and business partner] Tim, and I always go to Hotel du Palais in Biarritz. It feels like you're on the prow of the *Titanic* with sweeping views of the Atlantic. It was the former imperial residence of Napoleon III and Eugénie de Montijo. It's impossibly grand and old-fashioned. Everyone has stayed there, from Winston Churchill to Cary Grant. They probably all gambled at the casino and frolicked in the surf."

Where was the last place you visited?

"We recently travelled to the Maldives, which was the perfect combination of relaxation and adventure, with temptingly warm blue waters, mesmerising views and wonderful sunshine. I love being outside, and no day is complete without some form of sport or activity. We stayed at Soneva, which had a wealth of experiences at every turn."

Where in the world have you felt happiest?

"I love the Caribbean – Barbados is fabulous! We have had a home on Sandy Lane named Rossferry for the past decade. It's the eccentric community and artisans that make the island so endearing. The inspiration for Rossferry came from the local culture and lush tropical surroundings. It's a place where you truly switch off – where you want to take off your shoes and never put them on again."

What's a destination that surprised you?

"I would love to go back to India. You find inspiration on every corner and it has such a rich and beautiful culture. I loved learning about the traditional process of hand-block printing on textiles that has been practised in Rajasthan for around 500 years."

What is your idea of a staycation?

"We head to the New Forest. We travel down from London every weekend as often as we can. The area has the best of both worlds – natural forests and the sea so you can ride and sail. We rented a property on the Solent strait, which looks across to the Isle of Wight, for years before we bought our own place. Nearby was The Master Builder's hotel on the Beaulieu River, where I still visit for breakfast or to look at the yachts. I learnt to horse-ride with my children in the New Forest – it's great to fulfil a childhood ambition when you're older. I have my own horse and we're quite sedate in the way we go round the forest, but we'll sometimes have a gallop down the beach."

“ Travelling always ignites the senses and you find you come back with lots of different ideas on colour and texture. I collect textiles when I travel. They tell a story. ”

What journey do you most often take?

"I walk to work every day along Exhibition Road in South Kensington, with the Victoria & Albert Museum on one side and the Natural History Museum on the other. These two buildings give much pleasure to so many people both architecturally and because of their incredible exhibits and educational lectures. The Natural History Museum, opposite our design studio, is Alfred Waterhouse's Grade 1-listed terracotta-clad masterpiece. It was built in 1881 and is renowned for inspiring building design that celebrates the natural world. Creatures carved into the walls seem both mythical and real."

Name a restaurant seared in your mind.

"I often take friends to Prawn on the Lawn, an amazing seafood restaurant with sustainably sourced fish from Cornwall. After a superb lunch I take them to the Barbican Centre for the latest exhibition or to a play at the Southwark Playhouse – it has fab independent theatre. I'm a long-term fan of the River Café. On the terrace they grow fresh ingredients. Some of my favourite dishes are the wild mushroom risotto and the Dover sole – and the chocolate "Nemesis" cake."

Can you share a fascinating individual you've met in your travels?

"Mimi de Biarritz is a French artist living in Biarritz. Mimi is always on the pulse with humorous, intricate pieces using cut-out cardboard, mixed-media printing, needle point, mosaics and furniture design. She's fearless and a true craftswoman. Mimi recently created 20 one-of-a-kind hats for us that were handmade from papier-mâché, cardboard and objects ranging from matadors to fishing gnomes."

What is the scoop on the next Firmdale property?

"Our 11th property, Warren Street Hotel, will open soon in New York's Tribeca. The downtown neighbourhood has so much to offer, with historic industrial buildings and cobblestone streets lined with boutiques and cafés. The hotel is a celebration of colour and design with 70 individually designed rooms and suites. All feature floor-to-ceiling Crittall windows, and many have private terraces and skyscraper views. There will also be apartments and as well as a restaurant, there's a bar and orangery."

Has travel nourished your professional growth?

"Wherever I go, I've always got my eyes open for design, whether it's hand-dyed blankets in South America, the wonderfully bright hues of Mexico or metal work in India. Travelling always ignites the senses and you find you come back with lots of different ideas on colour and texture. Textiles are an endless source of inspiration for me. I collect them when I travel. Textiles tell a story about the craftsman who made them and link to a rich cultural history."

Which items do you always pack?

"A hat with a brim or my nose starts to resemble Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in the sun. A good hat that fits well is hard to find when you need one. And a big multicoloured scarf that's been used as a wrap-around skirt when I spilt spaghetti Bolognese over my dress. Usually it jazzes up an outfit or keeps me warm on a plane. A scarf is useful and versatile."

What was the first trip you took that was transformational for you?

"When I was 21, I worked in a naturist camp in the south of France for a year. It was both educational and eye-opening."

What destination is next on your list?

"I'm keen to walk in Bhutan but may have to get fitter to do so. I would love to go. Also, I'd like to visit Guatemala to see colourful weaving techniques." 🍷