

hot spots JIA Boutique Hotel Apartments, Causeway Bay

It's been a long time coming but Hong Kong finally has its very own hip hotel of boutique proportions.

While New York, London, Paris and Sydney have long cultivated the designer home-from-home for style-meister travellers, Hong Kong has relied on its plethora of top-line hotels with harbour views to lure the tourist dollar. Enter JIA, designed by Philippe Starck and owned by Singapore entrepreneur Yenn Wong, 26.

Until March last year, JIA was a run-down residential eyesore off Jardine's Bazaar. It was bought for \$120 million by the Yenn family. Yenn teamed up with Yoo, the design company founded by Starck

and property developer John Hitchcox, and 57 serviced-apartment-style hotel rooms, from studio to penthouse, were the result.

White walls with yellow lighting, sheer, flowing curtains, oddly placed coloured gnomes for footstools, rose-coloured baroque couches and gilded mirrors set the opulent tone. Rooms are compact but still find space for small kitchens, and broadband access is provided.

It's a delight for fashionistas, with staff clad in Shanghai Tang, and enough complimentary Japanese bathroom cosmetics to fill your handbag. While room service is not on the menu,

Australian celebrity chef Teage Ezard recently opened his fine dining restaurant, OPIA in the hotel. Ezard's street cafe, Y, is also open and features Asian-Mediterranean home-style eats in a casual setting. Melbourne fashion designers Vicious Threads are also in evidence, running up natty ensembles for restaurant staff. London-based Hong Kong designer Andre Fu was responsible for the interiors.

Jia is Putonghua for "home", which by extension also means Central nightclubs the Kee Club on Wellington Street and Dragon-i on Wyndham Street, as well as the California Fitness centre near Times



Square: house guests enjoy complimentary access to all three.

Rates are quoted daily, weekly and monthly for short- and long-term guests. Studio apartments cost about \$1,600 a night; a two-bedroom penthouse is yours for about \$6,000 a night. But with near-capacity uptake, return guests and full houses already the norm, plans are in the pipeline for an extension of the JIA brand.

JIA Boutique Apartments, 1 Irving Street, Causeway Bay, tel: 3196 9000. See www.jiahongkong.com. Rachel Oakes-Ash

spree Seven Dials, London



Ed Peters

Just north of Covent Garden, Seven Dials is a one-off, doubly interesting, thrice-blessed, four-square, five-star retail romper room dedicated to shoppers with a sixth sense for the extraordinarily eclectic.

Among its maze of streets, alleyways and courtyards lie fashion boutiques, cheese shops, traditional ironmongers, specialist board-game stores, day spas and adult fashion shops with changing rooms equipped with peep holes.

Once notorious as the vice quarter of central London, Seven Dials has pulled itself up by its Manolo Blahnik bootstraps in the past five years, and the area – which centres around a 300-year-old hexagonal sundial – now puts the bling into Britain.

The first port of call for many is **Koh Samui** (tel: 44 20 7240 4280) at 65 Monmouth Street. From T-shirts to eveningwear designed by the likes of Julien MacDonald and

Tristan Webber, the place is cutting-edge, and you may well find yourself rubbing shoulders with stars from West End shows. Prices are pitched at a similarly stellar level, with some dresses going for £350 (\$5,225). At the other end of the spectrum at No. 23 is **Coco De Mer** (tel: 44 20 7836 8882), which sells everything from bed linen to bedroom toys and related past-the-age-of-consent merchandise. The aforementioned peepholes are for customers' friends rather than prurient passers-by. Some of the more conservative lingerie starts at about £38.

A few doors along, a passageway leads into Neal's Yard, open to the heavens, a suntrap in the summer and home to a clutch of cafes and bistros, as well as **Neal's Yard Remedies** (tel: 44 20 7379 7662). A half-hour Indian head massage here costs a pound a minute; but the spa offers substantial discounts on

weekend mornings, with hot-stone therapy priced at £20.

Walk-In Back Rub (tel: 44 20 7836 9111) next door sells a raft of therapeutic equipment, with a Jacknobber back massager costing £7.95.

At the other end of the yard, **Neal's Yard Dairy** at 17 Shorts Gardens (tel: 44 20 7240 5700) sells only English cheese, usually with a stack of the stuff piled temptingly high in the window. Cross the street into Thomas Neal's Centre, a converted warehouse, where the area's sporting and outdoors goods shops have converged. The best name here is **Fat Face** (unit 13, tel: 44 20 7497 6464), with men's rugby shirts tagged at £32.

Walk the triangle of Monmouth, Earlam and Tower streets and you pass **Dress Circle** (tel: 44 20 7240 2227), with a cornucopia of theatre memorabilia, **Orcs Nest** (tel: 44 20 7379 4254), which contains a phantasmagorical selection of role-playing board games and accessories, and **F.W. Collins**, an ironmonger's established in 1834 with the old-style telephone number (Tem 3964) writ large on the shopfront.

Seven Dials lays on free porters, specially selected for their patience, charm and brawn, who will tote purchases home. Book a porter online at www.sevendials.co.uk.

Ed Peters

review dive books

Asian Diver magazine has delivered another in its useful series of annuals with *101 Coolest Dives – The Thrill Seeker's Guide to the Planet's Coolest Diving* (\$80, Emap Singapore). The *101 Coolest Dives* attempts to identify the most-memorable dives around the world, from searching for the largest fish in the sea, the whale shark (Dive three at Richelieu Rock in the Similan Islands off Thailand) or tiny mating mandarin fish (Dive 50 at Mandarin Lake in Palau).

The guide has a great range of unusual dives, thanks in part to its wide choice of writers. Oddities include Dive 20 in the aquarium in Hualien, Taiwan, where you can dive with dolphins, sharks and eagle rays. Dive 22 takes you into the lost Lion City in China's Thousand Island Lake in Zhejiang, a metropolis flooded 50 years ago for a hydroelectric dam. The dives are sometimes literally cool, such as Dive 81 in the Arctic Circle, where you can see icebergs from below.

Divers looking for a guide that profiles a destination in more depth, literally and figuratively, can check out *Diving Australia – A Guide to the Best Diving Down Under*, the most recent in the series of handy Periplus Action Guides (US\$24.95, Tuttle Publishing). The book, by Australia-based photojournalists Neville Coleman and Nigel Marsh, covers the length and breadth of the "Wide Brown Land" and the diving around it in 348 detailed pages. Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef are given suitable prominence. One of the problems with covering Australia, however, is there are so many dive sites it is hard to do them justice. *Diving Australia* is well illustrated and comes with handy maps.

Lonely Planet has released *Diving & Snorkeling South Africa*, its first guide to the diving in that country and in southern Mozambique (US\$24.99, Lonely Planet Publications). The guide, written by veteran United States photojournalist Tim Rock and South African dive instructor Jean Pierre Botha, covers almost 100 sites. Underwater, South Africa offers ragged-toothed sharks, sea lions and great white sharks.

Alex Frew McMillan

