

AHEAD MEA 2022 Winners Announced

10th November 2022



AHEAD, the awards for hospitality experience and design, has announced the winners of AHEAD MEA 2022.

After receiving nearly 100 regional entries spanning 13 countries, AHEAD's regional judging panel of leading hoteliers, architects, interior designers and industry commentators narrowed-down their winners in 16 categories.

Leading names from the region's hospitality industry came together for the ceremony at W Dubai, The Palm, to celebrate this year's finalists and unveil the winners.

From a luxury lodge on the banks of the Lower Zambezi River to an eco-resort in the depths of AIUla's desert, some of the region's most compelling hospitality projects were showcased, demonstrating an array of original design concepts debuted over the past year.

25hours Hotel Dubai One Central was the ultimate winner of the night, taking home three awards including the coveted Hotel of the Year, lauded by the judges as "a fresh take on the region's hospitality scene that sets it apart from the rest".

As part of the ceremony's returning Special Awards, best New Concept was awarded to Sextantio Rwanda: known as The Capanne (Huts) Project, the concept features a series of traditional Rwandan huts made using local materials and traditions, in a bid to promote a more ethical form of tourism.

Elsewhere, the series' new Sustainability award went to Habitas AIUla, an eco-resort in Saudi Arabia's Ashar Valley constructed using only natural materials and modular construction methods, allowing a seamless, low-impact integration with the surrounding environment.

See the full list of winners below:

Sustainability

Habitas AIUla, Ashar Valley, Saudi Arabia

Set amongst the desert canyons of Saudi Arabia's Ashar Valley, Habitas AIUla is an eco-resort constructed using only ethically-sourced natural materials and modular construction methods, allowing for a seamless, low-impact integration with the surrounding environment.



New Concept

Sextantio Rwanda - The Capanne (Huts) Project, Nkombo Island, Rwanda

Featuring a series of traditional Rwandan huts made using local materials and traditions, Sextantio Rwanda promotes a more ethical form of tourism that aspires to preserve the area's natural balance. The project is centred around its anthropological axis: it is entirely funded by Sextantio members in the form of an NGO, which has helped provide health insurance to local Rwandan communities since 2008.



Bar, Club or Lounge

Leon - The Dubai Edition, UAE

Leon takes its cues from the Classical World, with a rich palette and mosaic flooring inspired by both Ancient Rome and the fado bars of Lisbon. Described by the panel as "intimate and cosy", the space is characterised by dark walnut wood walls and black Marquina marble countertops, creating a dramatic and deeply atmospheric space that is an exciting juxtaposition to the rest of the hotel.



Event Spaces

25hours Hotel Dubai One Central, UAE

The hotel's event rooms are characterised by lofty industrial ceilings draped in flowing fabric, creating a nomadic tent-like feel. The panel praised the spaces' "pockets of unique experiences for guests to enjoy", featuring hanging seats suspended over sand pits and floor-to-ceiling windows flooding the rooms with natural light and boasting views of the Museum of the Future.



Guestrooms

W Dubai, Mina Seyahi, UAE

Conceptualised by BLINK, the guestrooms' design flows seamlessly from the inspiration that guides the rest of the hotel; a modern bohemian vision capturing the spirit of the Al Mina Al Seyahi location, the legendary 'port of travellers'. Laden with "incredible detailing" that nods to the romance of travel, a treasure chest doubles as a bedside table and hanging lights echo the coloured lanterns of the souk, whilst fabrics feature motifs inspired by local calligraphy.



Hotel Newbuild

25hours Hotel Dubai One Central, UAE

Alongside interiors firm Woods Bagot, Hopkins Architects succeeded in creating a consistent design language that is "unique and inspiring". The floorplan centres around three courtyards with interconnected colonnades, which not only encourages guests to explore the hotel but allows for passive sustainability measures such as natural daylight and ventilation. Elsewhere, the façade features high performance glazing and external shading screens, whilst thermal solar panels contribute to the hotel's water heating.



Hotel Renovation & Restoration

The Westin Dubai Mina Seyahi Beach Resort & Marina, UAE

Stickman Tribe's renovation of the lobby, guestrooms and restaurant sees the hotel's striking mezzanine atrium anchored by a 12-metre wrought iron gazebo and adorned with delicate bird sculptures overhead. Below, the décor combines art déco elements such as bold patterned tiles with lush greenery to achieve a sense of timeless luxury, praised by the panel as "a game changer for the brand".



Landscaping & Outdoor Spaces

Fairmont Taghazout Bay, Morocco

Inspired by the relationship between the region's wadis and oases, Scape's design draws from the habitable plateaus found in between to create key moments. Verdant gardens spring from water features that weave their way through the resort, as though sculpting the landscape. In vaster areas, expanses of grasses move gently with the coastal breeze, whilst with low water-demand Rosemary and Lavender are interspersed with colourful hibiscus flowers to create a deeply sensory experience. The panel praised the "thoughtful use of indigenous plant species" and the "real sense of softness" offered by the overall design.



Lobby & Public Spaces

25hours Hotel Dubai One Central, UAE

Labelled by the judges as "fun, memorable and full of charm", the lobby is centred around the 'Fountain of Tales' library; a striking focal point adorned with over 5,000 books, artworks and trinkets inspired by the theme of nomad travellers. A palette of earthy, desert tones is accented by mosaic tiles and patterned fabrics reminiscent of the textile souk, whilst the double-height ceiling above is adorned with a playful night sky scene by artist Dominik Bulka.



Lodges, Cabins & Tented Camps

Lolebezi Safari Lodge, Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambia

Designed by Jack Alexander in partnership with Fox Browne Creative, Lolebezi is a luxury safari lodge set within a protected wilderness reserve on the banks of the Lower Zambezi River, offering an off-grid Zambian experience. Built using renewable bush-lodge materials such as locally-sourced grass thatch and reeds, the lodge twists around the site's Winterthorn trees to create a flowing floorplan, which is elevated to allow animals and floodwaters to pass unhindered. "A beautiful balance between integration with the landscape and luxury" - commented one judge - "a true example of what nature-based tourism should be".



Resort

Habitas AIUla, Ashar Valley, Saudi Arabia

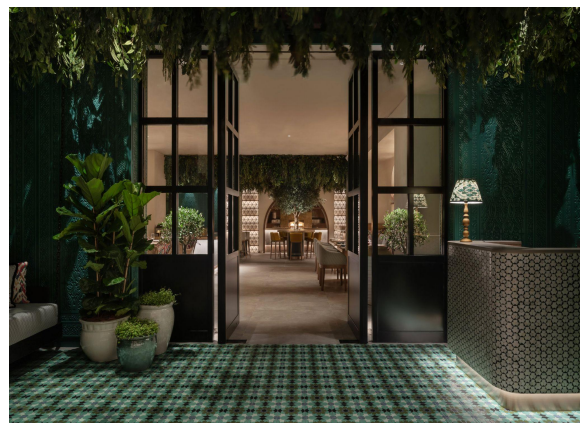
Overlooking the otherworldly desert canyons of AIUla's Ashar Valley, the 96-villa resort was praised by the panel for its "edited simplicity", with the design described as "an exquisite intervention in nature's amphitheatre". "It remains subservient to the landscape that envelopes it, and in turn, heightens the guest experience. True understated luxury."



Restaurant

Bushra - Grosvenor House, A Luxury Collection Hotel, Dubai, UAE

Conceptualised by LW, Bushra takes cues from Middle Eastern design, combining impressive Islamic archways and patterns with Moroccan-inspired tiling to create an eclectic backdrop for Head Chef Greg Malouf's Levant cuisine. The panel praised the design's "attention to detail" for creating "a strong and thoughtful character that pairs with the culinary experience".



Spa & Wellness

Thuraya Wellness Spa - Habitas AIUla, Ashar Valley, Saudi Arabia

The resort's third award of the evening goes to Thuraya Wellness Spa, comprising five treatment rooms, a fitness centre, an outdoor wellness agora, a yoga studio and a peaceful lounge space with an alchemy bar. Combining ancestral Middle Eastern rituals with global practices, treatments draw upon the tranquillity of the surrounding landscape to provide a holistic wellness offering that aims to recentre and recharge.



Suite

The Penthouse Suite - Hallmark House Hotel, Johannesburg, South Africa

Perched atop the Hallmark House Hotel in the heart of downtown Johannesburg, The Penthouse Suite was designed by Tristan du Plessis Studio in collaboration with Grammy award-winning artist, Black Coffee. Characterised by a sumptuous blend of dark wood panelling, bookmatched marble and 'tagged' graffiti carpets, the design evokes an urban luxury described by one judge as "beautiful, unique and relevant to its setting".



SPECIAL AWARDS

Visual Identity

La Maison Palmier, Abidjan, Ivory Coast

For Africa's first Design Hotel, AM Studio Paris worked closely with the designers to create a comprehensive brand experience that translates the hotel's unique personality whilst still incorporating a design-led approach to all its departments. A minimal palm leaf motif foregrounds an earthy palette, drawing upon the hotel's colonial-inspired interiors, accented by colourful illustrations of the hotel's lush tropical surroundings.



Hotel of the Year

25hours Hotel Dubai One Central, UAE

The group's first outpost outside of Europe was lauded by the judges as "a fresh take on the region's hospitality scene". Conceptualised by Hopkins Architects with interiors by Woods Bagot, the hotel is filled with "pockets of unique experiences for guests to enjoy" including the lobby's striking 'Fountain of Tales'. "Fun, memorable and full of charm".

