

Conversation with Andre Visser and Sandy Solano Diaz

By Stacy Suaya for BOUTIQUE HOMES



We love when a creative couple eschews their high-powered world for a more lo-fi experience. One such tale lies within the grand old walls of **AJS Residence** in Havana, Cuba. Founded and restored by Netherlands-born abstract artist and fashion industry veteran Andre Visser and his Havana-born partner Sandy Solano Diaz, a professional dancer and musician, the hotel blends the Old World with contemporary international design to dramatic effect.



And according to Andre, they're outliers in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Havana. He tells us that here, due to a political state that results in a lot of development restrictions, a small boutique hotel with a high level of service like theirs doesn't really exist. There are state-owned hotels-which definitely don't have the look that international travelers would like to see- or Casa Particulares, rooms rented out in the homes of local families, akin to Bed & Breakfasts). Scattered throughout are a few big chains.

The pair poured their experiences living and traveling around the world into creating something new for the Cuban capital, importing modern furnishings and adding boutique offerings such as a grand café-coffee bar that showcases local and international art, and on-demand massage on the rooftop. "We didn't want to build a place where people would just come and sleep. We want them to have an experience." Andre told us. We spoke to the couple to find out more.



WHERE DID YOU TWO FIRST CROSS PATHS?

Sandy Solano Diaz: "I was working at a private school in Moscow about seven years ago, and at the same time Andre happened to be there, working as a fashion designer."

Andre Visser: "We met, fell in love, and started thinking about the possibilities in Cuba - buying something and starting a small boutique hotel. We had both traveled a lot during our period in Moscow, and I had stayed all over the world, with production trips to Hong Kong, Beijing and India, and inspiration trips to New York, Milan, London, Tokyo and Paris. I was always in five-star hotels and I learned what I liked and didn't like. We wanted to do something very different from those experiences - something with character, authenticity, and a closeness to the people."



HOW DID YOU END UP GETTING THE PROPERTY?

SSD: "Well, it's not like in Europe where you have a broker to find properties. In Cuba you have to ask around. On a visit there one day, a friend told me about a house for sale, so I went and checked it out. Andre was in Moscow, but I fell in love with it right when I opened the door. I called him, sent 3-4 photos, and we both knew it was the place. I also liked the area where A|S is very much because it's close to where I'm from."

AV: "We agreed that it had all the features that we imagined, and the size and location were perfect. Even though part of the house had no roof, we could still see all the possibilities."



YOU BOUGHT IT SIGHT UNSEEN?

AV: "Yes! I hadn't even been to Cuba. But I had quite a bit of confidence in Sandy at this stage - we understood each other very well. That said, the first time I came here, it was already our property. We went in and I saw the big, high ceilings – all the rooms have five meter or higher ceilings, it's very impressive – and that height is something that you truly need to feel. I'm not quickly emotional, but the tears ran down my cheeks because it felt so good."



TELL US ABOUT THE BUILDING AND SOME OF ITS DETAILS.

AV: "It's formerly a home of two families, from the late 19th century and in the oldest part of Havana. It has all the authentic details: beautiful pillars, decorations, Carrara marble, handmade tiles. It just needed a lot of renovation and attention. The six rooms are spacious and there is the big salon and a rooftop."

"In our renovation, we also imported design furniture from Europe, like the Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair, and combined this with the Baroque touch of the architecture and a focus on contemporary art, in order to create a new flavor. We brought in Antigua green marble from the 70s and a lot of our tables were handmade by local craftsmen and iron workers.

"We brought in industrial lighting from Europe, all through a designer lens - everything has dimmers, and none of it is like anything you'd normally see in Cuba. The result is very calm and serene - the opposite of most of the big five-star hotels.



"And we created a Grand Café on the ground floor, which is a breakfast and lunch cafe that also doubles as an art gallery. We do special events, music and fashion shows there. We even offer dance classes like salsa, dance or Rumba. There is a big Italian espresso machine, the coffee beans are from Havana, and we have vegan menus. Everything is organic, pure and environmentally aware."



TELL US MORE ABOUT THE LARGE ARTWORKS AROUND THE HOTEL.

AV: "I have a design background and I'm also an abstract painter. Painting is my personal passion, so every room in the hotel has a piece that I created just for it. Even during the construction, workers were laying the roof and I was in the other room, painting.

"The pieces are a bit more colorful than my work in Europe, which has a lot of black and monochrome. Here, I used more color and made the art harmonious to the atmosphere of the house. I was inspired by the old tile floors and I also matched the colors to my 20-year collection of Venetian glass vases." www.andrevisser.art @andrevisser.art



WHAT HAPPENS ON THE ROOFTOP?

SV: "The rooftop spans the complete house and is very private because on one side we have a wall from our neighbors and on the other side, you can see complete Old Havana and great sunsets along with a roof top bar. And there's a rooftop bath that we use for spa experiences done by a local wellness company who does facials and massage treatments. It's loungey up there, it's quiet."



TELL US ABOUT THE VIBE OF OLD HAVANA, YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

AV: "You really must see the city by foot. Wander from plaza to plaza, see the UNESCO colonial buildings and all of the extremely friendly people and vendors of Havana. On most of the terraces you will hear authentic, live Cuban music, which is an integral part of the culture here. The level of education for music and arts is very high, and we recommend that visitors visit the Casas de la Música, where you can see musicians and performers in old, beautiful, colonial homes. Everybody is dancing - they usually take place right before dinner. We also have rental bikes, or you can order a vintage Cabrio car and go on a nice tour.



"It's such a different experience here, so exceptional and open-minded - and that difference is why we came here and not to any other tourist destination in the world."

