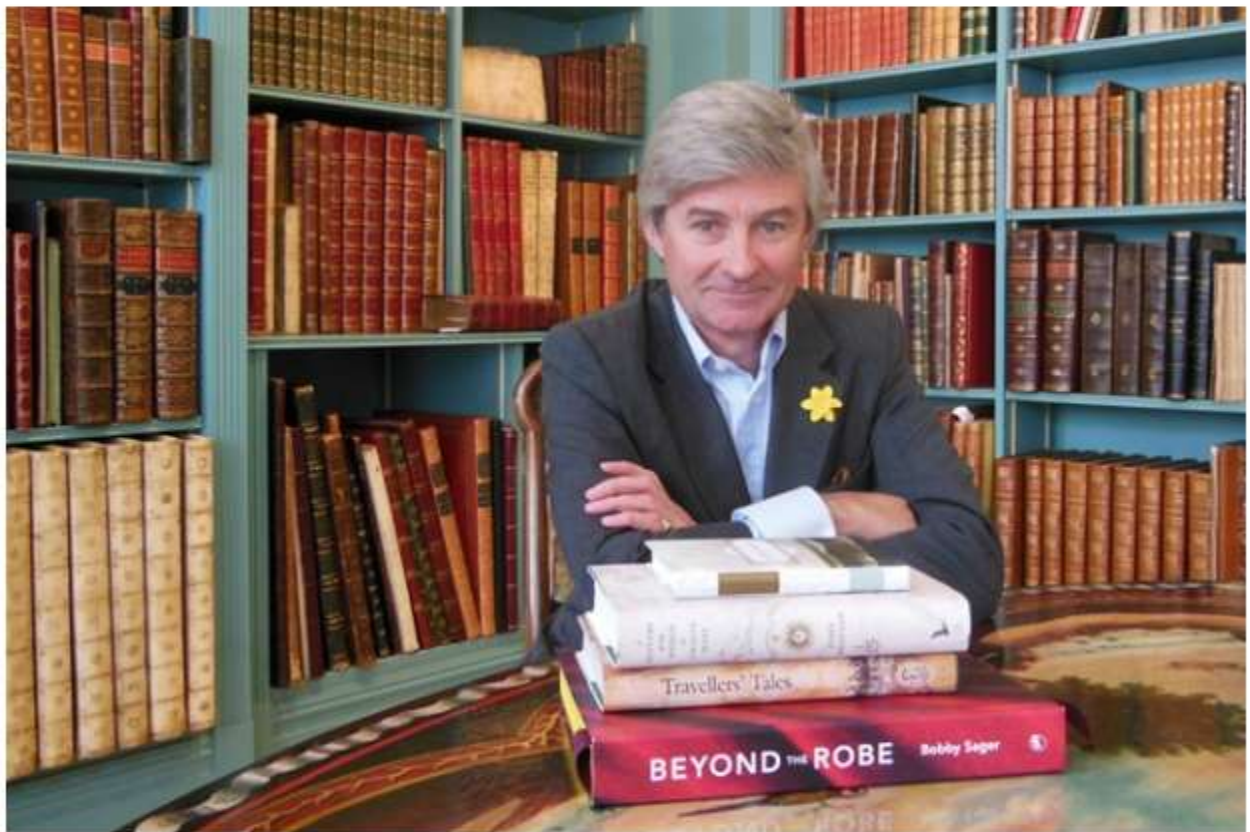


## Intelligent luxury

By Katie Sherry Aug 16, 2013

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*As laptops, tablets and smartphones become ever-more prevalent in our everyday lives, the act of reading books in their physical form turns into a luxury. As such, providing a hotel library can significantly enhance the guest experience – and for help, hoteliers and designers need look no further than Ultimate Library. Hospitality Interiors' Katie Sherry speaks with the company's founder, Philip Blackwell, about being inspired on a trip down the Nile, the place of print in the digital era and rising to challenges the world over.*

# Ultimate Library

The brainchild of book expert and enthusiast, Philip Blackwell, Ultimate Library is on a mission to make the world a better-read place. The company specialises in putting together bespoke libraries centred on the hotel's location to educate, entertain and inspire.

Ultimate Library is fuelled by a passion for literature. The company has been built from a lifelong love of books and travel on Philip's part, which – like many good ideas – was transformed into a concept with a spark of inspiration. "For me, this whole concept came alive when I took a trip down the Nile," Philip says.

"Somebody said to me, 'Do you know, a book you should really read is John Fowles' Daniel Martin – it has the best description of sitting on a boat, drifting down the Nile'. And that got me thinking: 'What are the other books that I should read when I travel that give me that sense of place?' From becoming a sort of personal challenge and hobby, it has developed into a service that we offer."

"Interaction with a really nice hardback book is a very emotive part of the whole reading experience. I would like to think that hotels buy into that concept"

In a world in which audiovisual technologies are progressing at a rapid rate, many people are more likely to read a novel on a screen than in its codex form. However, according to Philip, print is holding its own in the digital age. "Print books and electronic books are very complementary," he says.

"We do have an electronic offer that brings together magazines, newspapers and electronic books onto an iPad. For some people, that's the way that they like to consume. But books in a hotel provide more than just interaction with the books themselves – they provide that texture, they provide that soul.

"Interaction with a really nice hardback book for bibliophiles – the feel, the smell, the texture, the print on the page – is a very emotive part of the whole reading experience. I would like to think that hotels buy into that concept. I think the other important thing to remember is that the selection of books that are available digitally today is a fraction of what we can find in print."

The Ultimate Library team sources books from all over the world in a diverse range of languages, from contemporary novels to rare and illustrated editions. The company draws from all historical periods in its selection process. "We select our books and build a library to look as though it was built up over time – it wasn't created by walking down to a local bookshop in August 2013," Philip explains.

"We see no barrier to time – we like to create a library that features the best books; so the old books would be classics, the modern books would be the books that people want to read today, and we'll

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pick up on the key global issues of the day."

As the world continues on a path of constant flux, social, economic and political issues change – which has a direct impact on the literature that is produced. "There are 125,000 new books published every year, in the UK alone," Philip says, "and amongst those, there will be a selection of titles that are very specific to each hotel's location.

"There may be big global themes emerging – whether it's the emergence of China, or the financial crash in recent years – and we like to give hotels the books that everybody is talking about. This shows that the property has got its finger on the pulse of what is new and exciting, and is there to anticipate guests' needs."

Tailoring its libraries to each individual hotel is a big part of Ultimate Library's service, and for good reason. Gone are the days when hotel libraries were made up from books that guests have left behind – today's discerning traveller requires a more intelligent and focused option.

"Certainly in my experience and in our research," Philip explains, "reading for pleasure is sort of a guilty pleasure, that people – particularly very busy people – only really get to do on holiday. If hotels use their library as part of their marketing, then it becomes a guest service that people really value."

# Ultimate Library

Ultimate Library's bespoke service extends from its book selection to the design of the space. The company works closely with its clients and interior designers to create libraries suited to each individual property. In addition to the venue's location and style, Ultimate Library places great emphasis on brand values. At Six Senses Laamu in the Maldives, for example, Ultimate Library emphasised the hotel's eco message through books such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

"We've provided a whole encyclopedia of different solutions for people," Philip says. "There's one hotel in East Africa where the client wanted the books in every room specially re-covered with their own logos on – which was a wonderful challenge.

"No project is too small, and no challenge is one we won't rise to. We have put 150 bibles into a hotel in Zambia, we have put a large collection of illustrated books into a hotel in North Korea. Typically, the amounts of money that people spend vary from a few hundred pounds up to tens of thousands of pounds."

The hotel's guests are not the only people to benefit from Ultimate Library's service. The company works with its clients to donate a library to the local community for every hotel library provided, and has so far given books to AIDS orphanages in Africa, a tsunami orphanage in Phuket and a school in Mauritius. The same care and attention is put into the selection process, with the children's age groups and interests taken into consideration.

Ultimate Library is currently working with a number of hotels around the globe, in countries such as the UK, Italy, Switzerland, East Africa and the Maldives. Catering to clients around the world often poses some very interesting challenges, as Philip explains: "We were rung up the other day by somebody who wanted some books in Chinese on the Antarctic, to go onto a luxury cruise ship in Antarctica.

"We were lucky enough to have somebody on the ground in Beijing who was able to go and find some books, bring them back to London and deliver them to the client, who then flew them to Antarctica to meet their Chinese clients."

With the world getting ever smaller, the opportunity to travel has become more accessible. This has led to changes in traveller trends, as Philip explains: "A lot of people from emerging markets – such as China, Russia and Brazil – are starting to travel, and particularly travel to Europe. This is bringing some of the big Asian brands into Europe. Aman Resorts, for example, is expanding from Bali, Indonesia, Thailand, to new openings in Turkey, Greece, Montenegro and now Venice.

"What that means for us in terms of book collections is a lot more high-end illustrated books. For example, for ME London we have put an enormous book – measuring about 1.5m x 750cm and weighing about 20kg – in the middle of the reception area. This provides the initial wow factor when guests walk into the dramatic space."

Hotels are renowned for providing luxurious experiences, and what a well-focused library brings to this is a sense of time and authenticity – something that perhaps lacks in many people's digitally-focused everyday lives. "I think books add intelligence, they put soul into a place," Philip says.

"After all, what is more luxurious than to sit in your suite or your room and have some beautiful, illustrated books that bring the best of your location into your hotel suite? They can inspire, entertain and provide a window on what else is there and where you might go."

# Ultimate Library



The Magdalen Chapter, Cheltenham



1 of 8

ME London



2 of 8

# Ultimate Library

Carlisle Bay, Antigua



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⏪ ⏩ ✕

Six Senses Yao Noi, Thailand



4 of 6

⏪ ⏩ ✕

# Ultimate Library



# Ultimate Library