

TheRealKnightsbridge



Ultimate Library

"Our greater purpose is to create a better read, better educated world," starts Philip Blackman, founder of Ultimate Library. We are in his office at Shapero Rare Books in Mayfair, home of Ultimate Library and some of the rarest books in London.

Ultimate Library is the world's leading supplier of bespoke libraries for hotels, resorts and private residences. The majority of their work is for luxury hotels, and these range from chains like the Fairmont and Hilton to bespoke luxury hotels like the Ampersand in South Kensington.

"We believe we put a little soul into hotels," Philip explains. "We help project the personality of that property; it might be the location or the interior design, but it all adds to the texture of what they are trying to do for their guests and what they are trying to say about themselves and their location."

Most of the work involved in building a library is in selecting the books rather than designing the setting, although Philip and his team do advise on basic tenets such as lighting, shelf height and accessibility. It might sound like they have the easiest job in the world, until you realise that Philip has seemingly read every book that was ever published.



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"We look at four things," says Philip. "Where they are, what are their brand values and their interior design style, what is the profile of their guests and then we talk to the management team about what they like and what they would like to see there. We then put that into a mixer and that tends to suggest a collection quite quickly."

Location plays a major role in selecting an Ultimate Library collection. This might be because many people only really read for pleasure when they are on holiday, or it might be because of Ultimate Library's own values: to educate, entertain and inspire. All of the books they provide meet that criteria and many of these are 'sense of place' titles. If you walk someone blindfolded into an Ultimate Library they should be able to run their fingers along the spines and work out where they are in the world.

Books and travelling are so inseparably bound that reading a book about the place you are visiting really helps to bring the experience to life. If you are in the south of France you might read *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald; if you are in Sicily you might read Andrea Camilleri's detective series; if you are in London you should probably read Shakespeare's Sonnets or Dickens; and if you are in Bangkok then John Burdett would be the obvious choice.

There are other books that almost always find their way into an Ultimate Library and receive consistent praise from guests who discover them. Philip's personal favourites include *Little History of the World* by E. H. Gombrich; *The Poetry of Birds*; the *Hello Goodbye* book of 101 ingeniously linked encounters between the famous and the infamous; *The Traveller's Day Book* giving you a tour of the world in 366 quotations; and a healthy selection of 'indecent obsessions' — like *The Scent Trail* and other inspiring books of people searching the world to satisfy their obsessions be it perfume, chocolate, coffee, whiskey, cigars, makeup or even sand and shells.

Ultimate Library also commission bespoke one-of-a-kind books for clients. Philips says, "We will do bespoke editions for particular hotels. Sometimes hotels are put into a building with tremendous history, so we might do a short story for guests to read. We will also rebind books in a corporate style — so for the Aman Resort in Venice we bound J. G. Links' *Venice for Pleasure* with the Aman colouring and a nice stamp on the cover."



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I ask Philip about projects he feels particularly proud of, knowing it must be difficult to choose between libraries in such diverse locations — game lodges in Kenya, resorts in Asia, spas in the Middle East and riverside suites in the Savoy.

He says, “We are proud of any library where people have seen it and ask if they can have one too. That is the ultimate accolade,” and then adds, “Logistically, we face some pretty tough challenges. We are proud of a project where we had a travel operator who wanted some books in Antarctica for Chinese guests, in just 10 days. We did it.”

Libraries are constantly changing as guests donate books and take books with them at the end of their holiday. Philip seems to advocate this and suggests that if a guest takes a book away with them and keeps it on their bookshelf at home then they will get a lovely warm feeling about their week away every time they look at it. This makes sense, and is clever (and inexpensive) marketing for luxury hotels.

To cater for these ever-changing libraries, Ultimate Library has an annual update service that keeps everything fresh. If books are missing then they are replaced with either the same book or a book of similar quality. Philip tells me that there is hardback fiction that they have supplied that has since become rather rare and sought after, such as *Wild Wood* by Roger Deakin. It might be hard to replace if it goes missing but it is a great addition to a collection.



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Giving books to guests is not the only way that hotels can give back to the community. Ultimate Library also has a Philanthropy Program that helps to educate local communities around the world by donating libraries. Ultimate Library has donated libraries to communities such as a wilderness reserve in Kenya, an aids orphanage in Isiolo, a local school in Dibba and a Tsunami Orphanage in Phuket.

Hoteliers are beginning to realise just how important it is to have a good library in a luxury hotel — how important it is to educate, entertain and inspire their guests. People do remember what they read on holiday and it seems logical to supply guests with reading material they might never have otherwise discovered. Think about how often people return from a holiday and the first thing they talk about is what they read when they were there.

I am surprised to learn that the value a resort library adds is disproportionate to the cost of creating one. An Ultimate Library can cost as little as £2,000 – £3,000. Although, you can spend as much as £12,000 – £15,000 if you want something really bespoke. It seems that there is certainly demand for it, with over 35 Ultimate Libraries now existing and more planned for the future.

"I feel that we will have achieved success when a scholar or a member of staff at one of the hotels tells me that their first reading experience was in the local library we donated. The reason we do this comes back to what I first said: that we want to create a better read, better educated world."

For more information, visit www.ultimatelibrary.co.uk.

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