

InsideOut

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Our annual lighting special

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Designer Nikki B is a rising star amongst the well-heeled of Dubai. Having previously worked in such glamorous destinations as Geneva and Milan, designing interiors for homes, a hotel and even a mega-yacht, she has now turned her attention to the UAE.

Text: Lance Leonhardt, Freelance Writer; Photos: Courtesy Nikki B Interiors

Nikki B, interior designer to the great and the good of Dubai, showed an interest in design at a very young age, although she was not commercially active until much later in life. She tells us the story. "I suppose you could say it all began in 1973. When I was a young teenager a close aunt died and my mother, father, sister and I all inherited a small amount of money each. My sister and I actually got over £1,000! My father bought a caravan for our holidays, my sister opened a savings account and I spent it all redecorating my bedroom in Mary Quant fabrics, with white deep pile carpets and John Lewis furniture. It was very avant-garde at that time and I was very proud of it!"

At school, the budding designer found that her choice of profession was not on the careers roster. "I am not even sure that interior designers existed in my home town of Bristol! I headed into the hotel industry, which in itself led me back to interior design and decoration. After getting married, my then-husband's family bought an old run-down property on a lake in the hills of Wales and we set about refitting it as a country house hotel. The place

was on 44,000 acres and had been used as a hunting, shooting and fishing camp for ex-military and landed gentry types who revelled in the harsh life. It had no heating and no hot water, and in 1983 it was a zero star property!"

She describes her favourite parts of the project. "A few of the bedrooms lent themselves to some great face-lifting." The drawing room was another room that appealed. "Decorated in canary yellows and deep blues it was, and still is, beautiful. The Welsh Tourist Board still uses an image of it in their CNN ads. It is timeless, country cool." However, when asked if she would take on another hotel project, she is dubious. "One hotel in a lifetime is enough," she grins. "And that's not what I do. I like to make a house not just a home, but a spectacular environment for a family to live in, with lots of shapes and colours to set the moods and activate the senses."

During the '80s and '90s, she cut her design teeth on a number of unpaid projects. "I did a number of free consultancies for friends and family when I was able to. In one case I had a call from a friend who had just moved to Lyon in France. He had rented a loft-type space





Nikki B manages to stay on top of all the details with the help of her skilled craftsmen.

My job and my passion
are the same. Not many
people can claim that

in an old silk mill. He brought with him a candy pink leather sofa set with matching candy pink hi-gloss tables – his part of the furniture split from his UK divorce. After three days he was totally depressed living there; he had moved from an apartment full of Louis XV furniture with a view of the lake in Geneva, so I had no choice but to sympathize. We coordinated his wallet to my schedule and I flew down for three days to put the place together. Lyon is an amazing source of *objets d'art*, and I had three days of moving from shop to shop, spotting and measuring, picking fabrics and choosing curtain makers, painters and decorators. Two weeks later it was painted, papered and the curtains were up. The big challenge of course was how to make the place masculine using a candy pink sofa and table set as a centrepiece. His ex-wife had definitely tried to have the last laugh with him! After the papering and painting was complete I flew back down and took three Lyonnais SUV-type taxis for the day and finished the art, lighting, plants and china in just ten hours. The taxi drivers thought I was mad! But in the end my friend entertained there a great deal in the following two years, so that tells me it was a success!".

As a direct contrast with her first major project in the peaceful green of the Welsh hills, Nikki then moved on to what is possibly the most renowned and glamorous multi-millionaire hangout in Europe – Monaco. Here, she designed the interiors of two boats. Firstly a *Mangusta 105'* which became known as 'The



Above: This nature-themed interior reflects the clients' Scandinavian roots



Above: 'Ritz-Carlton Florida meets Bali' is the theme of this Arabian Ranches home



Versace Boat' and ended up being owned by the Emir of Qatar, then a Sunseeker Predator sports yacht. She also designed an apartment to feel like a super-yacht for a friend who, at that time, wanted a boat but could not afford one. Simultaneously, she was working on the interior of a Georgian townhouse in the UK... and all just for the love of it.

Her passion became a business by default when she moved to Dubai. "After moving here in early 2004 I was in a local fabric shop choosing for our new villa. A local lady who was in the shop was struggling a little to mix and match fabrics and asked me if I was an interior designer and would I advise her. I did so and even gave her my phone number and told her if she needed further help to call me. Three months later she called and told me she had convinced her husband to redecorate their

villa in Sharjah and their weekend place in Al Ain and they wanted to hire me to do it. So 30 years after my bedroom job I was a commercial interior designer and I've been busy ever since.

"One of the great things about working in Dubai and the UAE is the quality of the tradesmen. I have artisans in my team who constantly amaze me with their skill, I never was one to rush out and spend my clients' money on super-expensive Italian-made furniture. There are very few items made of wood, glass, fabric or steel that cannot be made to a very high quality level here in Dubai. We also have the ability to create from any fabric, leather, and ceramic imaginable. Sitting at the crossroads of the world make the world's products available. In creating, I am not stuck with what the Italians are doing or the French. My clients' oyster is the world. That's exciting!"

Above: Nikki's previous home in Dubai Marina. Here the colours and textures reflect the ever-changing views over the water



When Nikki finishes designing an interior her aim is to hear 'wow!' from the client, and with this eclectic bedroom, she certainly succeeded



With clients ranging from the rich to the royals, it's quite surprising that Nikki feels under no pressure. "My clients are from all walks of life, but they all want the same things - value, quality and reliability. They want me to meet their expectations, I want to exceed them. When I finish a room or a floor and they see it for the first time I want to hear 'wow!'. And I want them to hear 'wow!' every time they show it to their friends.

I did take stock last autumn when it suddenly hit me that on that particular day I had 163 people relying on me for their income. That's a

great responsibility, that's pressure!

"My job and my passion are the same. Not many people can claim that. If you have imagination this is a wonderful business, very rewarding, but it's not about waltzing through a series of rooms in flowing silk gowns with colours and furniture magically changing as you pass. It is a battle to project manage your client's dream from the starting line to the finishing post. It's all about Timberland boots and hard hats, plaster in your hair, dust on your teeth. It involves frustration, mismatched wallpaper, fighting with suppliers and babysitting your artisans. It's wonderful!"