

Hidden Belgium: Le Berger

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The hotel Le Berger was built in 1933 as a ‘rendezvous hotel’ where couples could rent one of the 50 rooms by the hour.

‘This was a place that kept many marriages together because it allowed people to sleep with a different lover,’ said Fredy Martens, who ran the hotel from 1965 until a few years ago.

When the hotel finally closed in 2009, the building was scheduled for demolition. Not many people thought it was worth saving. But Isabelle Léonard saw the potential. ‘They had already started demolishing the hotel when I visited,’ she said. ‘I looked around and fell in love with it. I thought it was a hidden gem.’

Six months later, she had persuaded the investment group that created The White Hotel to renovate the hotel. The project brought together two more women – the Belgian architect Olivia Gustot and the Swiss interior designer Martina Nievergelt.

It was a difficult assignment. The building was a warren of winding corridors, narrow stairs and cramped rooms with dodgy wiring.

The hotel appealed to Nievergelt because it reminded her of old movie houses. ‘What touched me most was the history of the building, the stories within the walls,’ she said. ‘I wanted to preserve the eroticism,’ she said.

Some guests love this hotel and its louche history. ‘You feel the wings of history sweeping through this gem of a hotel,’ one tourist wrote on Tripadvisor.

Derek Blyth’s hidden secret of the day: Derek Blyth is the author of the bestselling “The 500 Hidden Secrets of Belgium”. He picks out one of his favourite hidden secrets for The Brussels Times every day.