



Looking to spend some time in a stylish, spacious  *pied a terre*  in the heart of Jozi's northern suburbs? Ruan Swart, GM of #1 Melrose Boulevard is the man to talk to. By Tess Paterson

# modern comfort



We're standing in the penthouse of #1 Melrose Blvd. It's got some serious views to the south, across the frenetic N1, all the way to the iconic Brixton Tower. To the east we catch a view of a pin-striped businessman taking a smoke break on the balcony opposite. Work, play and downtime seem to blur seamlessly in the heart of Melrose Arch, the vast mixed-use precinct which is in the process of adding 56 000m<sup>2</sup> of office, retail and leisure space to its existing hub.

But inside it's remarkably quite – an enormous, light-filled, double volume haven that's not at all like a hotel. A spiral timber staircase leads up to an open plan office (with 24-hour wireless broadband, of course) and across a landing to a bedroom. Downstairs there are two more bedrooms, each with masses of cupboard space and sleekly mod bathrooms that make you want to leap in and soak in a lot of fragrant bubbles.

It's a clever business model: 310m<sup>2</sup> of stylish living space just a stone's throw from the Euro-chic bustle of pavement cafes, businesses and boutiques. Considering the penthouse's per-night rack rate of around €600, this casually sophisticated and well designed loft makes good sense for international visitors. I mean, let's be honest. For the same money in Paris you'll get a lot of crimson flocked wallpaper, but

your suitcase will barely fit inside the room. And your shower and loo may just turn out to be a kilometre down the passage.

"You've got to see the pool," says Ruan, who's responsible for the smooth running of the six contemporary units situated at the top of a circular core of offices. A lap pool, shallow but lengthy enough for a good work-out fills the outdoor courtyard of the penthouse. At one end is an intimate dining area for al fresco meals or meetings, at the other a gas braai, for guests who want to really enjoy their stay the South African way. It's a patio made to party.

For the past year, Ruan has been handling all the reservations, enquiries, billings and outsourcing of suppliers. His colleague, and mom, Lisa Swart is the executive housekeeper, and there's an expert team of three who handle the laundry. Ruan studied hospitality management, and trained for three years at Mount Grace in the Magaliesburg, under the Brand family. "I grew up in a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community in Centurion," he says. "During my training, all the newbies (there were 13 of us) had to share a seven-roomed house. All of a sudden I was surrounded by a whole lot of different cultures, religions and influences, and I loved it. The experience taught me a lot, and it has stood me in good stead for



my current position.”

In his third year, Ruan was asked to start up the concierge department, managing a team of porters, organising day trips, hikes or any special requests from guests. “In our industry the concierge desk is often referred to as the complaints desk,” he laughs. “If guests feel they’re not winning with the reception or other departments, then they tend to unleash their frustrations on the concierge.”

Ruan learned that a big problem for one individual is often a miniscule problem for another. “People react in different ways, from polite requests to tears and shouting. One of the guests, a tiny lady, ended up pounding me on the chest with her fists because she wasn’t happy with the way her bed had been made up. Handling this requires enormous patience and tact, but sometimes you’ve just got to wing it, to figure it out as you go. My most valuable lesson has been to react as soon as possible. People need assurance that things will be sorted out.”

Ruan describes the market for #1 Melrose Blvd as predominantly corporate, including international visitors who are looking for a stylish and secure base for short-term stays. “Many of our clients stay for just one night,” he says, “and the longest stay has been around three months.” Of course I ask about the guest list of international celebs, and while he hesitates to reveal all, he will say that Nicole Murphy (former wife of Eddie) checked in recently with her boyfriend Michael Strahan. “They really loved it here, and the privacy in particular. They were able to relax in style, and enjoyed the anonymity that some of the big hotels can’t offer.”

That brings us to hospitality trends, and Ruan believes that people are tired of staying in stock-standard hotels. “Apartments like these are gaining popularity, much like the rise of the original B&Bs, 15 or 20 years ago. Guests are looking for personalised, professional service, and in our case we have the benefit of absolute privacy and tons of space. I also think that the interior design plays a big role. It’s very inviting, and reminiscent of Africa in a contemporary way.”

We take a stroll through one of the two-bedroom units, and again the floor plan is unexpectedly generous. There’s a large veranda (more than sufficient for a summer drinks party), a double outdoor shower where you could honestly swing a cat, and an open plan living, dining and kitchen area with airy, double volume ceilings. Naturally the apartment is fully kitted out and serviced daily, and if you’re rushing to an early meeting, Ruan’s team will supply you with fresh coffee and a continental breakfast.

When he’s not looking after guests, Ruan loves to sing. “I was in the school choir for 12 years, and sang in all the high school plays. Friends say I should do *Idols*, but I’m not sure that’s my scene!” Back on duty he describes his job as challenging. “Without doubt it’s hard work; it’s a life on call,” he says. “But I’m constantly meeting new people and learning from them. I love the networking aspect, and at the end of the day I want this to be the best stay a guest can possibly have in Joburg.”

