

How Rafael Nadal went from global tennis legend to hotel ace

In an exclusive interview following the announcement of his retirement, the King of Clay talks to Agnish Ray about his new venture in Mallorca

At Rafael Nadal's tennis academy in his hometown of Manacor, Mallorca, I am surrounded by the satisfying thwacks of balls being knocked across the net. I await the Spanish sporting legend at a terrace bar overlooking the 45 courts where 160 aspiring tennis stars aged between 12 and 18 train every year, dreaming of following in the footsteps of the record-breaking athlete himself.

Nadal, now 37, founded his academy seven years ago – but I am here to learn about another venture that will keep him busy in life beyond tennis. We are meeting just weeks after he revealed that next year will likely be his last on the courts; and now he is the co-founder of a new hotel brand, Zel, whose first property – with 165 bedrooms – has just opened here on the tennis champion's native island, aiming to encapsulate “the essence of the Mediterranean”.

The 22-time Grand Slam singles winner meets me after a morning of rehab, still recovering from recent hip surgery. The injury kept him out of last month's French Open, the first time in 19 years that the King of Clay missed the tournament, which he has won 14 times. He is on the mend – “poco a poco (bit by bit)”, he says – but he is a no-show at Wimbledon and will be



◀ Hitting all the right notes: fun and informal, Zel Mallorca has wood and linen touches with terracotta-tiled flooring



off the courts for the rest of the year. With his feet firmly on Mallorcan soil for now, the timing of Zel's opening seems fortuitous. Its location in the sportsman's birthplace, from which he has been largely absent since his teenage years, sounded to me like a dreamy place to come home to – but Nadal takes a more pragmatic view. “It's not romantic,” says the two-time Wimbledon champion, who spent 209 weeks as world number one. “It's logical.”

He seems aware that investing in one of the most valuable local industries is a smart game. “Mallorca lives off tourism,” he says. “Ever since I was born, the island's economy has depended on it.” With the sector accounting for around 45 per cent of the Balearic economy, hotels can be a lucrative business. And the project isn't just about Mallorca – Zel wants to open more than 20 properties around the world in the next five years.

“I'm not a hotelier,” Nadal quickly clarifies. Instead, this partnership with the Meliá hotel group – a marriage between two leading homegrown assets – means the matador of the tennis court needn't worry about day-to-day management. “I am here to learn,” he continues. “My contribution is to carry over what I like when I'm travelling.”

The mood at Zel is fun and informal, with chilled house music playing on the sound system; the staff dress in relaxed beige linen, while rustic wooden ceiling fans spin overhead. Esparto rope hangs on the walls and lines the bannister of the spiral stair-

“Sport educates you in a lot of things that you can put to great use in business”



▲ Rafael Nadal with Meliá CEO Gabriel Escarrer at the hotel's launch party

case – the hotel's architect Alvaro Sans tells me it is the kind used on fishing boats, a nod to the Balearics' maritime traditions. Mallorca's typical blue and white lenguas pattern, made with ikat dyeing, is found in much of the upholstery, including the rocking chair on the sea-facing balcony of my bedroom.

Just don't expect tennis courts, a racquet on arrival or lime-coloured balls everywhere. Nadal says he has intentionally avoided making his presence felt too much, something he would see

as “egocentric”. Instead, the hotel has opted for more “relaxed sports”, with a gym, a yoga studio and outdoor activities among the offerings for guests.

At Beso Beach restaurant, I enjoy a garlicky grilled sea bass with a glass of Mallorcan wine. The colour palette is sandy, with wood and linen touches and terracotta-tiled flooring. Beso Beach also has outposts in locations such as Formentera, Ibiza and Sitges; its newest spot also extends to Zel's pool area, with direct access to the beach.

Deià, Valldemossa and Pollença are among Mallorca's most picturesque places but the first Zel, somewhat surprisingly, is on the site of a previous Meliá property in Palma Nova – a purpose-built resort town on the southwest coast. It is right next to Magaluf, notorious for attracting rowdy, drunken Brits. I pass topless men of all ages around the Passeig Mar strip, where holidaymakers can spend their time in American diners, sports bars, karaoke joints and countless shops selling beachwear and souvenirs. Cuisine ranges from Indian and Chinese to jacket potatoes and fish and chips.

Nadal admits that this isn't the finest part of the island – but he believes it is changing. “The area has improved substantially in the past few years,” he says, “especially Magaluf, which was overcrowded with parties, alcohol and excess.” The Balearic government has been introducing measures to curb booze-driven tourism here, including cracking down on happy hours, two-for-one deals and late licences. “We want to contribute to improving the quality of the area,” says Nadal.

At Zel's official opening party later that evening, I hope to run into Roger Federer or at least Feliciano Lopez (who was in town for ATP Mallorca) – no such luck. Still, around 300 guests attend to toast the new hotel, enjoying music around the pool. Beso Beach's seafront position means people on the promenade get a look-in too.

In adding this new string to his bow (or perhaps racquet), Nadal joins Andy Murray, Lionel Messi and other sports stars who have turned to the hotel sector: it seems the competitive, motivated and ruthless personality of a world-leading athlete might carry well to a business-savvy life. “Sport educates you in a lot of things that you can put to great use in business,” Nadal says, having been on the professional tennis journey

since the age of eight. “People think that my life has just been tennis, but that is far from the truth.”

The Nadal I meet today is smooth, polished and ready for business – but we have all seen and fallen in love with his softer, less corporate side. Who didn't shed a tear watching him hold Federer's hand as the two men wept at the Swiss maestro's final match last Sep-

tember? But the Spaniard isn't choking up about his own transition away from the game just yet. “It's important to look straight ahead,” he says, resolutely. “Change is difficult but I have always been an emotionally balanced person. Neither the big successes nor the hard times have changed me much.”

Fans will be eager for a triumphant swan song from Rafa. Beyond that, they

might hope to bump into him at Zel – or at least book the suite he has slept in. “My sporting career is coming to its end,” he says. “I have spent years preparing for my future – this is another step towards it.”

Agnish Ray was a guest at Zel Mallorca (00 34911989367; hellozel.com), which offers double rooms from £257



▲ Zel Mallorca is the first of the brand's hotels – but it hopes to open 20 more worldwide

Star quality: three hotels owned by top athletes

CROMLIX BY ANDY MURRAY
Located near the Scottish tennis star's hometown of Dunblane, this luxurious country manor had a renovation this year, sprucing up its 15 bedrooms and common areas such as the billiards room – Murray's favourite. New art from his collection is now on display, including works by David

Shrigley and Damien Hirst. The bedrooms are named after the flowers and herbs found in the surrounding 34-acre grounds. Doubles from £310 (01786 820310; cromlix.com)



MIM BY LIONEL MESSI
The latest opening in this chain by the Argentine soccer skipper is a mountain retreat in Andorra, adding to others in locations including Ibiza, Baqueira and Sotogrande. The restaurant features some of Messi's favourite dishes, while the Leo Messi suite has an outdoor hot tub and views of the Pyrenees. Doubles from £149 (00 376 739 900; mimhotels.com)



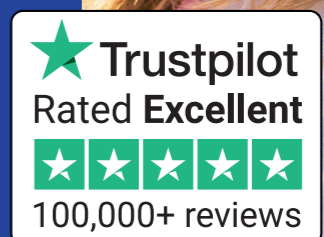
PESTANA CR7 BY CRISTIANO RONALDO
This joint venture between Portuguese hotel group Pestana and Portugal's most famous footballer has opened five properties to date, in locations including Lisbon, New York and Marrakech. Look out for various pieces of Ronaldo-related memorabilia, from jerseys and boots to photographs and awards. The chain has also announced plans to open a new hotel in Paris, slated for 2027 (020 3467 7355; pestanacr7.com)

▶ Sporting hoteliers Lionel Messi, Andy Murray and Cristiano Ronaldo

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