

THE GREAT LONDON HOTELS

by John Brunton

If any one city in the world could lay claim to the title of World Capital of grand hotels, then no one could dispute the choice of London. Names like the Ritz, Savoy, Claridges, and the Dorchester, epitomise luxury and grandeur. In fact, they are not even referred to as “grand” any more, but rather “palace hotels”. And what has happened over the years is that these legendary establishments have actually become tourist attractions in their own right. So even if your budget doesn’t stretch to actually reserving a luxury suite, why not splash out for say, afternoon tea at The Ritz, cocktails at the Savoy’s American bar, dinner at Claridges or an old-fashioned English breakfast at The Dorchester. You will be drawn into a nostalgic world where Britain once claimed to “Rule the Waves”, but the seductive charm of these quintessential London institutions is irresistible.



THE RITZ

150 Picadilly, W1,
tel: 7493 8181, fax: 7493 2687
www.theritzlondon.com

Out of all the grand palace hotels in London, the Ritz stands out from all the rest. The hotel takes its name from its legendary creator, Cesar Ritz, the man known as “king of hoteliers, and hotelier to kings”. This grand building, resembling nothing less than a French chateau, dominates Picadilly, looking out over the royal gardens of Green Park and Buckingham Palace. Opened to worldwide acclaim in 1906, the place simply oozes glamour. The Ritz has always been in the spotlight, from the early 1900’s when King Edward VII would scandalously dine with his mistress in the Marie -Antoinette salon, so to in recent times, when Prince Charles would make his first public appearance with his now wife, Camilla Parker-Bowles coming out of a dinner party at the Ritz.

Almost everyone can splash out at least once in their life to savour the Ritz experience. First of all, there is of course, the matter of dress code - no jeans allowed, no sneakers, and gentlemen must be wearing a jacket and tie. Once inside, the plush but understated lobby is dominated on one side by a grand marble staircase and on the other, is the busy concierge’s desk. The concierges of the Ritz, still known by the old-fashioned title of Hall Porter, look more like elegantly attired army officers, with crisp white gloves tucked into their shoulder epaulettes. The only indication that we are in the twenty first century is that they all now have discrete ear plugs with walkie-talkies, so the doorman outside immediately warns of the impending approach of a dignitary or celebrity. A pair of glass doors open out from

the lobby into the hotel’s Grand Gallery, which immediately transports the visitor into the sumptuous world of Louis XVI decor - glittering chandeliers, velvet armchairs and sofas, richly brocaded curtains and wall hangings, classical marble statues and ornate gilt tables. On the left is the Palm Court, the ultimate place for traditional English afternoon tea. Impeccable waiters serve Darjeeling, Earl Grey, Lapsang Suchong or Jasmine tea, accompanied by delicate smoked salmon and cucumber sandwiches, freshly baked scones with strawberry jam and clotted Devonshire cream. Just make sure to reserve well in advance, as the Palm Court is fully booked virtually. Across the hallway at the Rivoli Bar, you encounter a very different element of the Ritz’s personality. To begin with, the statuesque decor of the Palm Court is replaced with a much cooler Art Deco look, and the formal, genteel mood of afternoon tea is transformed into the casual, fun ambiance of a lively cocktail bar. Gentlemen are even allowed in without a tie!

The master of ceremonies here is the bubbling head barman, Alan Cook, a South African, who effortlessly moves from serving martinis to talkative ladies taking a break from shopping, to finding a quiet corner seat for a couple of movie stars who don’t want any prying paparazzi to catch them out. Although the barmen will shake any cocktail you care to order, this is the place to drink an old-fashioned Ritz Champagne Cocktail, a lethal mix of Grand Marnier, vodka and champagne.



THE SAVOY

The Strand, WC2,
tel: 7836 4343, fax: 7240 6040
www.savoy-group.co.uk

Walking along the Strand, you only really notice the Savoy by

the steady flow of limousines that glide into its understated entrance. In typically eccentric English style, the entrance to the Savoy is the only official road in the country where cars drive on the right hand side! The Savoy may not look as grand from the outside as the Ritz, but once you walk into its palatial marble lobby you immediately have the feeling of being in a legendary hotel. The famed Victorian impresario, Richard d'Oyly Carte founded the adjacent Savoy Theatre to showcase the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. With their immense success, he decided that the audience needed a place to stay after the show, and five years later in 1889, at a then unheard of expense, the Savoy Hotel opened its doors, stunning London society with its full electric lighting and the grand number of 67 baths. The ubiquitous Cesar Ritz was lured from Paris to run the hotel, while the cuisine was put into the hands of none other than Auguste Escoffier. There are hundreds of anecdotes about the hotel's extravagant guests. Back in 1905, Venice was recreated in the forecourt with 400 Fortuny lamps and a silk-lined gondola decorated with 12,000 carnations for the Gondola Dinner, with Caruso entertaining guests. Pavlova danced at the Savoy, Maharajahs and their court set up residence for weeks on end, Winston Churchill dined at least once a week, Monet painted the Thames from his room, and more recently, Elton John flooded a floor as he left the bath running while talking on the telephone. The best place today to get a real feel for the delightful faded glory of this hotel, is to settle into one of the comfy leather armchairs of the wonderful American Bar. Their cocktails are legendary, accompanied by delicious traditional British nibbles like "welsh rarebit" and "devils on horseback". While the Savoy's famous Riverview restaurant is closed for the moment awaiting renovation, it is nevertheless open every Sunday for a brilliant jazz brunch, that is a favourite rendez-vous for London's movers and shakers. Another hidden secret of the Savoy is its beautiful Art Deco swimming pool, part of a gym and spa complex that is open to non-guests who buy a day pass.

difficult to beat. This was the Queen Mother's favourite hotel. Prince Philip held his Stag Party here before marrying Queen Elizabeth, while Dwight Eisenhower planned the Normandy D-Day Invasion from his suite. Owned today by the Sultan of Brunei, the Dorchester's introductory brochure clearly spells out the management's philosophy: "Calling The Dorchester a hotel is like calling champagne a fizzy drink or caviar a sandwich spread. The Dorchester rejects bland luxury in favour of an unashamed celebration of opulence.....". And be assured they live up to their word. In the 1950's the hotel hired the legendary theatre designer, Oliver Messel, to design a series of suites for them, and the one named after him - famously reserved by Liz Taylor and Richard Burton for their honeymoon - has to be seen to be believed with even a gold-leaf toilet seat in the bathroom. The bars and restaurants are a riot of roccoco design, giant chandeliers, Greek columns and swirling frescoes. The Oriental restaurant is utterly decadent, with the interiors echoing India, Thailand and China, but the most unforgettable experience is to arrive for breakfast in the Grill Room, which is a cross between a Spanish palace and Baroque chapel. This is where you must endure the ultimate English culinary experience - grilled kippers, bubble and squeak, lambs' kidneys or the definitive test of an enthusiastic foodie, "kedgeree", a creamy curry risotto of smoked haddock, that was the favourite dish of the colonial rulers of British Raj. And you may witness eccentric sights too, as when the earnest waiter, dressed in his formal long-tailed frock coat, takes an order for scrambled eggs covered with a pile of baked beans. No matter, in the Dorchester, the customer always gets what he wants.



THE DORCHESTER

Park Lane, W1,
tel: 7629 8888, fax: 7409 0114
www.dorchesterhotel.com

Built in the 1930's as a luxury hotel that would "rank as the finest in Europe", the Dorchester may not be the most famous of London's palace hotels, but for over-top-opulence and a clientele that stars the world's rich-and-famous, it is



CLARIDGE'S

Brook Street, W1
tel: 7629 8860, fax: 7499 2210
www.claridges.org

Claridge's has a justified reputation as one of London's most eminently respectable, you could almost say, staid hotels. But

dig back through its early history and you discover a rather more risqué background. Founded way back in 1812 as Mivart's, the rumour was that James Edward Mivart was probably acting under Royal authority to establish a residence to accommodate foreign royalty, nobility and diplomats in a style befitting their rank, while maintaining the ambience and discretion of a private house. The hotel stretched over five houses in the heart of fashionable Mayfair and established a reputation as a haven for a clientele that sought anonymity rather than the public eye, which is still the case today, though for rather different reasons. In the 1850's, the hotel was bought by the Claridge family, giving it the present name, and received a first significant renovation at the turn-of-the-century, so that it could rival the likes of the Ritz and Savoy. Then in the 1930's, the owners transformed the hotel into a dazzling celebration of Art Deco design, using the finest British craftsmen of the day. Despite the obvious demands of 21st century modernisation, Claridge's remains pretty unchanged today, except that the media-star chef, Gordon Ramsey, has now opened a restaurant in the hotel's dining room. So the old-fashioned reputation for discretion is slightly waning as everyone wants to follow Tony Blair's example and have himself photographed dining at the chef's private table in the kitchen.



ONE ALDWYCH

1 Aldwych, WC2,
tel: 7300 1000, fax: 7300 1001
www.onealdwych.com

In most classic tourist guides, you won't find the name of the One Aldwych in the section devoted to Palace Hotels. To begin with, it has only been open for a few years. There are scarcely more than a hundred rooms, and heaven forbid, the staff dress like fashion models and even the concierge doesn't wear a formal dress suit. But before banishing One Aldwych to the capricious list of boutique hotels - hip one day, passe the next - pay a visit and you'll come away with a different opinion. The vast granite building that houses the hotel could not be more grandeur, occupying a triangular site at the busy junction of The Strand and Aldwych. Dating back to 1907, the architects were the same as for the Ritz in both Paris and London, though originally this building was the headoffice for The Morning Post Newspaper, then becoming a bank. One Aldwych is privately owned by a suave independent hotelier, Gordon Cambell Gray, and you can immediately feel that this is a one-off property luxuriously designed to his personal desires and whims, rather than following the tried-and-trusted formula of a multinational company. The biggest surprise awaits the guests who take the

elevator down to the basement. Here, in what was once the vaults of the bank, is a state-of-the-art gymnasium and spa, but also an incredible swimming pool that resembles a subterranean blue lagoon. The other surprising innovation that One Aldwych brings to the hotel world is its private movie theatre. With just thirty plush leather seats - including a little ledge for a Dry Martini - Hollywood films are screened on weekends. You can reserve for either dinner on Saturday evening or a Sunday morning brunch, which is then followed by the screening of an exclusive movie.



MANDARIN ORIENTAL HYDE PARK

66 Knightbridge, SW1,
tel: 7235 2000, fax 7235 2001
www.mandarinoriental.com

While maybe not quite as impressive as its distinguished neighbour, Harrods Department Store, this imposing red-brick hotel has recently been given a sumptuous £57 million facelift by the kings of the luxury hotel business, Mandarin Oriental, which has definitely restored it to its former glory. Looking out over Hyde Park in one direction, and chic Knightsbridge in the other, the hotel was originally built in 1889 as that most English of institutions, an exclusive "Gentleman's Club", where ladies were not allowed past the door, and members indulged their pleasures in lavish salons, restaurants, snooker and billiard rooms. Transformed into a grand hotel at the turn of the century, the Hyde Park, being almost next door to Buckingham Palace, became a favourite haunt of the Royal family. Queen Elizabeth learned to dance here, Prince Philip held cocktail parties for his polo playing friends, and Prince Charles and Princess Anne often came for afternoon tea when they were children. Today the attractions are somewhat more sophisticated. The Mandarin has opened a state-of-the-art spa, which has to be the finest in London. The Foliage restaurant combines a gourmet Michelin-starred menu with unparalleled views over Hyde Park, where you may even see The Royal Horse Guards trotting past on their way to Buckingham Palace. And to really step back into olde-worlde England, on a sunny day, guests can order a personalised picnic hamper. The hotel's footman carries and sets out the picnic under a shady tree in Hyde Park, with the hamper brimming with goodies such as poached Scottish lobster, fillet of beef Wellington, Stilton cheese, and strawberries with clotted cream. Imagine that!