

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



VIP TREATMENT AT LONDON'S HOTEL CAFÉ ROYAL

The Oscar Wilde Lounge at Hotel Café Royal was a favorite of Princess Diana, Elizabeth Taylor, Winston Churchill, and of course, Oscar Wilde.

BY JULIET PENNINGTON | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

When visiting a bustling, historic city like London, there's so much to see and do that one's hotel is usually just a place to sleep between one day and the next. But Hotel Café Royal, located on Regent Street between the upscale Mayfair and funky Soho districts, is so warm and inviting and has so much to offer that it's tempting to want to stay indoors. Whether it's enjoying the contemporary rooms with traditional English oak accents, the Carrara marble-laden bathrooms (complete with in-mirror televisions), or a proper English high tea in the ornate Oscar Wilde Lounge, with its gilded gold walls, cherub murals, and scrumptious sweet and savory delights, this 160-room/suite hotel is an experience unto itself.

The Oscar Wilde Lounge was a favorite of not only the restaurant's namesake, but of the late Princess Diana, Winston Churchill, and Elizabeth Taylor, to name a few. Mick Jagger, Harry Styles, and Kanye West are just some of the famous faces who have been spotted there in recent years.

From the moment guests enter the hotel on either Regent (the original entrance dating back to 1865) or Air streets, they are treated like VIPs.

On a recent stay, my husband and I were rushing to check in so we could make a show in the West End, and not only did the smartly dressed gentleman who greeted us take our bags and tell us we

could "sort out" check-in details when we returned, but he suggested the fastest way to get to the theater and assured us we had plenty of time, which helped alleviate some of our stress.

It's clear that hotel management places a strong emphasis on customer service, as evidenced by every employee we encountered, from the housekeeping staff to the servers in Hotel Café Royal's dining establishments that range from fine fare to a more casual French brasserie — and even a fun dessert-and-champagne eatery called "Cakes & Bubbles" that fronts Regent Street (great for people-watching). Not to be missed is Ziggy's cocktail bar, a sleek retreat and tribute to rock legend David Bowie. It was at Hotel Café Royal where, in 1973, Bowie threw an epic party — with a guest list that included Paul McCartney, Lou Reed, and Jagger — to retire Ziggy Stardust, his androgynous glam rock alter ego. Pictures of Bowie, taken by English photographer Mick Rock, adorn the bar. Even some of the drinks, like Darkness and Disgrace and Cat From Japan, are a nod to the late music icon.

While this historic, five-star hotel retains much of its traditional charm, a vast, four-year, nearly \$290 million renovation (the hotel was closed from 2008 to 2012) brought many contemporary comforts to guests.

We were upgraded to a suite that was elegant, with English oak accents and a classic design, but with select modern furniture and a Bang & Olufsen in-room entertainment system. I was half-suspecting that we would get a call from the front desk with a complaint from neighboring guests about the Elton John tunes we were cranking, but then realized that the suite had to be just about soundproof, since we could look out at the hustle and bustle of Piccadilly Circus, yet did not hear any noise from outside.

Adding to the tranquility of the property is one of its hidden gems, the Akasha Holistic Wellbeing Centre, located inconspicuously in the basement. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, we did not get to experience any of the tantalizing treatments, one of which uses 23-karat-gold mineral shea butter. The spa also offers water treatments in a Watsu pool, and has a lap pool, sauna, hot tub, Hammam, and a well-equipped gym. Several guests with whom we spoke told us the spa was the highlight of their stay. A definite to-do the next time we're in London.

Hotel Café Royal is a splurge, with rooms starting at \$570.

Visit hotelcaferoyal.com

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HERE

HISTORIC FARMHOUSE GETS UPSCALE MAKEOVER

Farmhouse charm meets contemporary elegance at the Shelter Harbor Inn. Located on three acres of land in Westerly, R.I., steps from the shore on Block Island Sound, the property's original 1800s farmhouse was completely revamped in 2019. Debuting with 13 guest rooms (with 10 more scheduled to open this spring) the spacious accommodations host between two and four guests, with each room offering a private bathroom. Larger rooms are equipped with ily coffee machines, robes, balcony, and fireplace. The newly opened Ascend Spa offers an array of massages and skin treatments. Two dining options serve a variety of New American cuisine and New England classics six days a week. Through April 30, take advantage of \$199 per night deals, such as the Winter Getaway (includes bottle of wine and free appetizer with dinner, Sunday-Thursday); and the Tuesday Tasting Wine Getaway (three free wine tastings paired with three free appetizers). 401-322-8883, www.shelterharborinnri.com

PLAN AHEAD AND SAVE ON SUMMER TRAVEL

To celebrate Maine's 200 bicentennial in 2020, and its own 90 years in business, the Shelter Harbor Resort is offering two new packages for travelers who plan ahead. Book the deals by March 31 and save later at this coastal resort located in Phippsburg, 50 minutes north of Portland. The Bicentennial Lighthouse & Lobster Lovers



Package features accommodations in its 10-guestroom lighthouse; breakfast each morning including lobster omelet; lobster roll lunch in Ledges Pub (or boxed lunch to take to the beach); and dinner each evening at The Pilot House, including — what else? — a fresh whole lobster dinner. \$200 per person for stays through June 30. Book by phone only with code: LOBSTER. Not a lobster lover? The Maine's 200th Birthday Deal, applicable throughout the summer, offers a \$200 resort credit with any booking 5 nights or more. Book by phone only with code: MAINE200. 866-389-2072, www.sebasco.com

THERE

CANADIAN RIVER CRUISES DEBUT

You don't have to travel to Europe to experience an elegant river cruise with CroisiEurope. How is that possible? The company is launching its first North American

cruise itinerary in June with round-trip voyages on the Saint Lawrence river from Montréal. Hop aboard the recently acquired MV Belle des Océans, CroisiEurope's first flagged ship in North America, for an itinerary that includes stops in Québec ports of Cap-aux-Meules in the Magdalene Islands, Tadoussac, Saguenay, and the cobblestone streets of Old Québec City. The ship offers 62 cabins, two restaurants, fitness center, beauty salon, swimming pool on the deck with poolside bar, and more. Multiple sailings are avail-



able through September. Rates from \$9,237 per person; book up to three months before departure date for \$830 per person discount. 800-768-7232, www.croisieurope.com/destination/cruises-canada-st-lawrence

"WINTER" PACKAGE ALL YEAR LONG

Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach is offering a Winter & Friends Package that is available through the end of this year. The deal is not about the chilly winter season; it's a chance to meet Winter the bottlenose dolphin, star of the movie "Dolphin Tale." Ideal for families looking for a beachfront oasis, the package includes accommodations of your choice, including a new specially themed Mavis the Sea Turtle Bunk Gulf View room or Winter the Dolphin Bunk Gulf View room; two general admission tickets to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium; and Winter the Dolphin and Sea Turtle plushie. A portion of the package proceeds will be donated to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium to support their mission of preserving marine life through rescue, rehabilitation, and release. Book by Dec. 31 for stays through Dec. 31. Package rates from \$349. 727-281-9500, www.wyndhamgrand-clearwater.com/offers

VATICAN MUSEUMS UNTOLD HISTORIES TOUR

Discover the true history about famous artists of the past through a new tour offered by Quijly, an Italian tour operator specializing in

gay and lesbian tourism. The three-hour "Vatican Museum In a Gay and Lesbian Light" tour looks at the numerous artworks referencing male homosexuality, including hidden secrets about the private life of Michelangelo; the little-known tomb of Queen Christina of Sweden, a declared lesbian who is buried in St. Peter's Basilica; and The Parnassus fresco, painted by Raffaello Sanzio, depicting Sappho, the ancient Greek female poet who is considered the first lesbian poet. Includes a cocktail reception following the tour at Coming Out Bar (the first Gay Bar in Rome) in front of the Colosseum. Price from \$195, includes English-speaking guide, and skipping ticket lines to the Vatican Museum and Sistine Chapel. +39-02 786-22532, untoldhistorytour.com/tour/rome-vatican-museums-in-a-gay-light

EVERYWHERE

TSA-APPROVED SKINCARE

Tired of attempting to transfer your favorite beauty products into TSA-approved containers? Onekind eliminates that messy procedure with a selection of products that are all packaged in less than the 3.4-ounce limit. Breeze through airport security while keeping your skin hydrated and fresh with Midnight Magic PM Serum (to brighten and firm skin); Dream Cream Nighttime Moisturizer (for intense hydration); and Pore-perfection Refining Facial (to polish, purify, and brighten skin). From \$24-\$42. Or try the Let It Glow Trio, and get all three in a handy travel pouch for \$89.

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