

The world's best colonial hotels

**Jeremy Lazell and Richard Green pack their linen suits & panamas for a tour of the world's classiest colonial hotels
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Whisper it, but are hotels becoming dull? Frette-Egyptian-cotton this, widescreen-plasma that ... close the curtains, crack open the minibar, and you could be anywhere from Khartoum to Kowloon. Where's the history? Where's the magic? Where, frankly, is the romance?

Step forward the colonial hotel. One hundred years after the abolition of slavery, Empire may not have left a lot to be proud of, but the hotels scattered in its wake are a start. How about staying where the British surrendered Hong Kong to the Japanese in 1941? Or in a hotel still boasting TE Lawrence's unpaid bar bill? A tea-planters' boarding house in Darjeeling? A hotel that inspired Agatha Christie's Death on the Nile? Now, there's romance...

OLD CATARACT, Egypt

On the banks of the Nile, south of Aswan, where big, grey boulders emerge from the water and give Elephantine Island its name, is the Old Cataract Hotel. Built in 1899, it immediately became a postcruise haven for all well-heeled travellers to Egypt. Agatha Christie was a guest on numerous occasions, setting several of the scenes in Death on the Nile here.

Then – as now – the summer temperatures soared into the 100s, and Aswan remains famous for its energy-sapping bustle, but inside the jealously guarded Cataract you can find an oasis of shade and sophistication.

The Moorish dining hall is fantastically atmospheric, and the sunset views over the Nile are unbeatable, either while smoking a shisha or sipping a cocktail.

The 131 rooms are high-ceilinged and atmospheric, despite a creeping tendency towards standardisation.

Details: Old Cataract Hotel (0870 609 0964, www.sofitel.com) has doubles from £101.

Contact Mediterranean Experience (0845 277 3304, www.medexperience.co.uk) for packages.

WINDAMERE HOTEL, India

A 19th-century boarding house for bachelor Brit tea planters in Darjeeling, the Windamere is an unashamed slice of starched Victoriana. Chambermaids slip hot-water

bottles into your bed as you sip G&Ts in the piano bar; lampshades in the "new" wing – formerly Loreto Convent – predate Vivien Leigh's time here as a girl; while fellow guests inevitably include sun-dried chief constables stationed here before the war. Best, though, is the view from the gardens as you take tiffin: tea plantations below, with 28,169ft Kangchenjunga – third-highest mountain on earth – above.

Details: Windamere (00 91 354 225 4041, www.windamerehotel.com) has doubles from £106, full-board. Contact TransIndus (020 8566 2729, www.transindus.com) for packages.

BARON HOTEL, Syria

After climbing the ramparts of Aleppo's magnificent citadel and strolling through its covered souk, there's no finer spot for a recuperative G&T than the bar of the Baron Hotel. It was built in the early 1900s for Orient-Express passengers, who at that time pushed on to Baghdad, and the old settees sag from the seats of Charles Lindbergh, Yuri Gagarin, Charles de Gaulle and Theodore Roosevelt. Agatha Christie started *Murder on the Orient Express* on the terrace, and King Faisal proclaimed Syrian independence from a balcony.

But it's Lawrence of Arabia, with his casual attitude towards settling a tab, who gets pole position in the roll call of fame: his unpaid drinks bill is framed above the bar.

The hotel may have clanky plumbing and creaky corridors, but it's a treat, and it's still run today by the family who opened it.

Details: Baron Hotel (00 963 212 110881) has doubles from £27, B&B. Fly to Aleppo from Heathrow with British Airways, from £714.

GREEN HOTEL, India

It was built in the 1920s as a bijou palace on the outskirts of the city for the maharaja of Mysore's three daughters, and later became a film studio; now it's a ravishing small hotel, with 31 quirkily decorated rooms and all profits going to local charities. It's the perfect place to relax and play a board game – perhaps by the croquet lawn, sitting under a ceiling fan on the ivy-clad veranda, or in a nook by stained-glass windows. The little restaurant in the garden does superb south Indian specialities, from £1, and be sure that you book into the original building for its pukka patina.

Details: Green Hotel (00 91 821 425 5000, www.greenhotelindia.com) has doubles from £40, B&B. British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) flies nonstop from Heathrow to Bangalore, from £409, a 2½hr train ride away.

DOS TALAS, Argentina

South America is almost creaking with converted estancias and palacios, and Cuzco's La Casona (www.inkaterra.com/cusco), an 11-suite, 16th-century mansion opening in

December, is just the latest in a string of colonial hotels fit for a conquistador. For now, however, our favourite is Dos Talas, two hours south of Buenos Aires, near Dolores, and run by the fifth-generation descendants of Pedro Luro, the Basque pioneer who built the estancia in 1858. Set in nearly 4,000 private acres, with a foreverness of pampas beyond, Dos Talas has a stable of horses, and a tick list of more than 300 species of birds. That's if you even make it outside: bedrooms here are whitewashed and littered with original antiques, with vast picture-window views from the bed, and a turret snug just begging you to curl up with a glass of malbec.

Details: Dos Talas (00 54 224544 3020, www.dostalas.com.ar) has doubles from £125, full-board, including activities. Contact Last Frontiers (01296 653000, www.lastfrontiers.com) for packages.

PENINSULA HOTEL, Hong Kong

The Peninsula has held court over the southern tip of Kowloon ever since opening its doors in 1928. The grand ballroom was the hot ticket of Hong Kong society until the Japanese interrupted the dancing, and in 1941 the British actually surrendered the territory by candlelight in room 336. The service is immaculate, the rooms supremely tasteful, with European elegance and Chinese flourishes. The hotel is on its sixth fleet of Peninsula-green Rolls-Royces, employed to glide guests on airport transfers, and is one of the few colonial classics to have added an extension that actually works. The 28-floor tower brings the Pen bang up to date too, with the Starck-designed Felix restaurant: famous for fabulous harbour views, and the floor-to-ceiling windows behind the gents' urinals.

Details: The Peninsula (00 800 2828 3888, www.peninsula.com) has doubles from £233. Contact CTS Horizons (020 7836 4338, www.ctshorizons.com) for packages.

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB, Cambodia

The art deco-style residence of the former French governor has been reinvented as a boutique hotel-cum-hip nightspot. The mansion's makeover includes 31 cutting-edge rooms – the beige and cream calm that you'd expect – plus bold contemporary art, a spa and a beautiful black-tiled swimming pool perfect for dusting off after a day at Angkor's temples.

Whether you stay here or not, you have to drop by in the evening, when the large pond is lit by candles and the ceiling fans are at full tilt. You can grab a steak, play on the black billiard table, watch the sky darken over a cocktail, or salute the many skittering geckos with a cold bottle of Angkor beer.

Details: The FCC (www.fcccambodia.com) has doubles from £59, B&B. Contact Bailey Robinson (01488 689777, www.baileyrobinson.com) for packages.

MOUNT NELSON, South Africa

This place makes a powerful first impression. There's an Athenian-style gateway of pillars and an avenue of tall palms to be whisked through, and the magnificent pink-painted main building has the elevated horizon of Table Mountain right behind. We've been saving our grande dame epithet for Nellie, as she is known. Opened in 1899 and a destination for new arrivals from the Union-Castle steamships, she's been a crucible of Cape society ever since. The 201 good-sized rooms are sprinkled with antiques and Union-Castle memorabilia; there are suitably grand public spaces, a vast pool, high tea on the lawn and plenty of dining options.

Details: Mount Nelson Hotel (0845 077 2222, www.mountnelson.co.za) has doubles from £282, B&B. Contact ITC Classics (01244 355550, www.itcclassics.co.uk) for packages.

STRAWBERRY HILL, Jamaica

More than 3,000ft above the Caribbean, with veranda views from all 12 private villas over the Blue Mountain coffee estate, this one-time plantation house, complete with the only full-service Aveda spa in the Caribbean, is an almost painfully romantic retreat.

Purchased 35 years ago by Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, Strawberry Hill was where Bob Marley convalesced after being shot in 1976, and it's easy to see why: hummingbirds buzz by your hammock, butterflies flit in and out of your airy, teak-floored rooms, fireflies flicker above your muslin mosquito net as you drift off in your mahogany four-poster. There's hiking and yoga, a 60ft pool and sauna, but rum punch in a teak armchair on your veranda takes some beating.

Details: Strawberry Hill (01895 450731, www.strawberryhillresort.com) has doubles from £199, full-board. Contact Seasons in Style (01244 202000, www.seasonsinstyle.com) for packages.

CORSTORPHINE HOUSE, New Zealand

Built in 1863, this Palladian-style mansion overlooking Dunedin harbour was once the family seat of the well-to-do Sideys, only becoming a hotel in 1998, when it was restored to within a high-arched inch of its 19th-century grandeur. However, while downstairs it's all iron-lace verandas, chandeliers and white-panelled ceilings, upstairs the bedrooms look like something an eccentric Victorian collector might have cobbled together with lottery funding. There are eight bizarre but utterly seductive rooms themed along Egyptian, Japanese, Scandinavian, French, Scottish, Indian, Moroccan and art-deco lines. Only five minutes from the centre of South Island's second-biggest city, Corstorphine House – with 12 landscaped acres, a fruit orchard and herb garden – feels a million miles from the humdrum modern world.

Details: Corstorphine House (00 64 3 487 1000, www.corstorphine.co.nz) has doubles from £159, B&B. Contact Bridge & Wickers (020 7483 6555, www.bridgeandwickers.co.uk) for packages.

NORTH BUNDALEER, Australia

Nearly 120 miles north of Adelaide, set in 400 acres of bush and farmland on the edge of the outback, North Bundaleer is a bizarre, obstinately luxurious triumph of pioneering can-do. Dating from 1901, but restored only a few years ago, the four-bedroom hotel has lost none of its outrageous pioneer chic, with antiques everywhere: William Morris wallpaper and a mahogany partners' desk in the library; freestanding baths and 1740s Chinese toile wallpaper in the bedrooms; and a French rose-marble fireplace in the drawing room that wouldn't look out of place in Versailles.

This far from Adelaide, with views of the unforgiving wilderness from the verandas, the sense of folly is intense – and completely exhilarating. Fabulous food, exceptionally friendly hosts – it's a house party and Peter Carey novel all rolled into one.

Details: North Bundaleer (00 61 8 8665 4024, www.northbundaleer.com.au) has doubles from £150, B&B. Contact Audley Travel (01993 838800, www.audleytravel.com) for packages.

RAFFLES HOTEL, Singapore

Standing, in the words of Somerset Maugham, "for all the fables of the exotic east", the Raffles – named after the founder of the colony, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles – is a 120-year-old icon of eastern colonialism at its most shamelessly grandiose.

The last wild tiger on the island is said to have been shot under the bar and billiard room in 1902, and the Singapore sling was invented here at the Long Bar not long after; while Japanese soldiers are said to have found guests enjoying one last waltz when Singapore fell in 1942. From Coward to Conrad, Chaplin to Kipling, the ghosts of guests past are everywhere.

After a £52m face-lift in 1991, the Raffles today has inevitably lost a little of its original eccentricity, but there's still the odd glorious echo: 14ft-high ceilings, overhead fans, the largest collection of oriental carpets in the world, and peanut shells on the floor of the Long Bar.

Details: Raffles Hotel (00 65 6337 1886, www.raffles.com) has doubles from £404, room only. Contact Western & Oriental Travel (0845 277 3355, www.westernoriental.com).

GALLE FACE, Sri Lanka

Built overlooking Colombo's seafront in 1864, Galle Face has a guest list – Mountbatten, Tito, Hirohito, Nixon, Nehru – that reads like Who's Who (try to wangle a look at the guest book). Refined service at the Peninsula in Hong Kong It's not hard to see why they came: frangipani fills the air, teak floorboards creak underfoot, epaulettes and handlebar moustaches are standard issue among the staff – it's not a hotel, it's an institution. And it's

magical. They may have refurbished the south wing two years back, but make no mistake, the GFH, as it is known by locals, is still the grand old burra memsahib of colonial hotels.

Details: Galle Face Hotel (00 94 11 254 1010, www.gallefacehotel.com) has doubles from £52. Contact Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000, www.coxandkings.co.uk) for packages.

EASTERN & ORIENTAL, Malaysia

Hogging 800ft of Penang's George Town seafront, the E&O looks like a liner moored on the strait of Malacca. When it opened in 1885, the island's other establishments were lost in its wake, with all of high society hightailing it to the E&O. Malaysia's breakneck progress spotlights the changeless calm of the E&O's classy exterior, with its busy, whitewashed facade, and delicate minarets sprouting from the red-tiled roofs.

You'll be greeted by a topi-toting doorman, and ushered into a world of bygone style – wicker and rattan, marble and crystal. It reopened in 2001, after a loving yet ambitious refurbishment, with 101 suites and 24-hour butler service.

Details: Eastern & Oriental Hotel (00 604 222 2000, www.e-o-hotel.com) has deluxe suites from £77, B&B. Contact Magic of the Orient (0117 311 6050, www.magicoftheorient.co.uk) for packages.

NORFOLK HOTEL, Kenya

The mock-Edwardian frontage of the Norfolk Hotel is a Nairobi landmark; its red-roofed portico has shaded the arrival of every colonial chancer before they settled into their Happy Valley homes. Grandee and coiner of the term "white hunter", Lord Delamere is still remembered in the eponymous terrace and bar, a traditional meeting place.

The hotel has fine public spaces, a good pool and the renowned Ibis restaurant, and there's an ox wagon, a rickshaw and a 1928 A-model Ford in the garden. But fate doesn't seem fond of the Norfolk, which has been burnt down, blown up and brutishly extended. Let's hope that the new owner, Fairmont Hotels, makes a better job of the current overhaul.

Details: Norfolk Hotel (0845 071 0153, www.fairmont.com/norfolkhotel) has doubles from £153.

Contact Somak Holidays (020 8423 3000, www.somak.co.uk) for packages.

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