



European Romp

A stay at The Dorchester begins a memorable excursion on the proper note

By Lisa Codianne Fowler

We arrive in time for traditional afternoon English tea, unaware that The Dorchester was recently named London's top tea venue by the Tea Council of Great Britain. I also admit I didn't know this hotel was among the top ten in the world when I booked our rooms. They say you're either smart or

lucky. If that's true, I'm on a Royal roll.

It was all arranged in a bit of a hurry. We postponed this trip several times, finally deciding to "just do it ..." two — stolen time — from work, never.

And now, I'm finger sandwiches. My our good friend Lowell, who same time. His wife tea from Wedgwood cups of scones and petit fours.

The Promenade is sweeping lobby with potted plants. Marble columns the crowned by gilded as we sink into plush marshmallows.



and a half days each in London and Paris from family, from friends. But it was now or

flanked by waiters serving Earl Gray and husband joins me in The Promenade with quite coincidentally is visiting Europe at the Deborah is soon seated beside me sipping eggshell-thin bone china, and nibbling on

the focal point of the Dorchester, a palms and towering fountains of flowering color of apricot parfait rise from the floor, Corinthian capitals. A pianist serenades us couches with pillows as soft as



Just off the lobby is The Dorchester Bar — designed by Parisian designer Alberto Pinto in a soothing combination of natural light, mirrors, bleached wood, pale leather chairs and blue and white La Morinerie ceramic tile murals. An exuberant glass and rhinestone baby grand, previously owned by the late Liberace, gleams in the corner. The hotel's award-winning Oriental Restaurant and traditional Grill Room restaurant are also off The Promenade, as is the Art Deco full-service spa.

It's tempting to spend the rest of the day ensconced in this opulence, but the clock is ticking — in this case Big Ben; though the name refers not to the famous clock tower, but to the 13-ton bell hung within.

The resounding gong echoes

through the streets just as we step through the Great North Door of Westminster Abbey, the tallest Gothic building in the British Isles. This architectural masterpiece was designed in the shape of a cross, its pointed style strongly influenced by contemporary French cathedral architecture. Over 3,000



people are buried or memorialized inside these walls, among them some of the world's greatest kings, queens, scientists, musicians and poets. The Abbey has held every English coronation for the last 900 years, a tradition that began with William I on Christmas Day, 1066. Today it is a living church dedicated to worship and to celebrating great events.

We celebrate our fortuitous reunion with our friends at Rule's, London's oldest restaurant. Its convenient Covent Garden location in the heart of the theatre district makes it perfect for pre- or post theatre gatherings. Established in 1798, the restaurant still specializes in game ("Eat game, it's good for you!"), oysters, pies and puddings. Not quite ready for venison, quail, rabbit or partridge, we share a variety of Irish and Native Oysters, unfamiliar in both appearance and taste, but quite savory. "We do not recommend the drinking of excess alcohol with oysters," the menu clearly states. Interesting disclaimer.

The ambience is that of an upscale lodge ... quiet, dignified and sporting, so much so that we feel like mounting our horses and trotting off to the hunt. But instead, we don our capes and scarves and take a brisk walk to the theatre for an ingenious production of the current hit, "Stones in His Pockets."



The next day we spontaneously hitch our American stars to "The Big Bus Company," a hop-on hop-off bus tour of the city. The bright red double-decker busses seem to be everywhere, offering a variety of mix and match routes and attractions. A bus tour is not normally my cup of tea, but for an informative, entertaining and comfortable tour of the

city, this one hit the spot. We "hop off" at St. Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, and the Thames river cruise. By the time we meet our resident English friends, Mike and Dee for dinner, we are more expert than they in London history and lore.

Ah, dinner. The Dorchester's Grill Room offers traditional British cooking in a sumptuous Baroque setting. We decide to sample all the wonderful fresh ingredients from around the British Isles ... succulent Scottish beef, sweet Welsh lamb, firm-fleshed wild salmon from the Severn and the Dee; crabs and lobsters from the rocky coasts of Cornwall; superb farmhouse cheeses from all over the islands. And apéritifs, digestifs and properly paired wines with each course. Why not?

Morning hangover! I love these down pillows. Can we spend the day in bed? We share tea and crumpets in our extra long claw foot tub while reading the London Times; declining Mike and Dee's invitation to join them back at their English country home; declining Lowell and Deborah's invitation to spend a day in Greenwich. Instead, we hit the streets of the city. Like veterans we navigate our way through town via the Tube, finding our way from Hyde Park, across from our hotel, to Covent Garden to the marvelous shops along Bond Street. Evening finds us quite unexpectedly at the National Theatre, enjoying a production of "Noises Off," thanks to George at the Dorchester's Theatre Desk who miraculously found front row seats at this "sold out" performance. Good show.

The world keeps changing. Last time I was here, there was no Chunnel. This high-speed, clean, efficient train delivers us from London to Paris within three restful hours. Our hotel, the Royal Monceau, is just off the Champs Elysees. Perfect. We stroll the avenue and pick up some vin, fromage and a baguette to tide us over until our dinner cruise with Les Yachts de Paris. The hotel concierge had recommended this company above others for an intimate gourmet dinner and tour of the City of Lights. At about \$160 per person, it is not inexpensive, but when in Rome...

The world is changing. The Eiffel Tour



now presents an hourly halogen light show, like sparkling fireworks reflecting on the waters of the Seine.



Between courses of foie gras, lobster salad, filet mignon and lamb medallions, we stroll the teak deck of what feels like our private yacht, and revel in this true, life highlight. Paris may be the only city built on a river, and there may be no better way to experience it than from a luxury yacht under a canopy of stars. And don't forget that snifter of Armagnac before disembarking.



Montmatre, Sacre Coeur, Notre Dame, The Left Bank, Latin Quarter, The Louvre, the Musee D'Orsay, we fit it all in. Seeing the "Millennium" Ferris wheel at the end of the Champs Elysees is a bit disconcerting.

There are a few more McDonalds than I remembered and some haute couture boutiques are replaced by variations of The Gap. Americanized, or homogenized? Hey, we are still in gay Paree, and even though everyone seems to speak English these days, I insist on speaking only in French ... quite a challenge when I find myself in need of Bausch and Lomb Multi-Purpose Contact Lens Solution. Nonetheless, I make myself understood while making my own reality, and making a few new French friends along the way.

Lowell and Deborah decline an invitation to join us for a final dinner at Hotel Meurice, a possible candidate for our next stay in Paris. Au revoir mes amis, we'll see you en Floride. In the meantime, we dine alone in sensory overload at this extraordinary palace, that is, not surprisingly, another jewel in the Dorchester crown.

What a romp – London, Paris, Sarasota. Full, fast, fabulous, fatiguing. Worth it? You bet.

For rates, information and reservations at the Dorchester, call 44 (0)20 7409 0114 or visit www.dorchesterhotel.com. For rates, information and reservations at The Hotel Royal Monceau, call 01 42 99 89 90 or visit www.royalmonceau.com.



london blooms

London is one of the greenest cities in the world, with parks and gardens as ubiquitous as its museums and galleries. Even if you're short on time, stop and smell the roses at one of these traditional favorites.

The magnificent Hampton Court Palace has 60 acres of Tudor, Baroque, and Victorian gardens including the famous maze and Privy Gardens. By the mid-sixteenth century there were Privy (private) Gardens at all the main royal palaces to provide the Sovereign with security and privacy away from affairs of state. The first Privy Garden at Hampton Court Palace was laid out in 1530 for Henry VIII. Today it is a carefully researched restoration of William III's garden as it grew in 1702.

From orchids to cacti, The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, grows more species of flowers and plants in its 300 acres than any other garden in the world. The Palm House Conservatory houses exotic tropical plants including banana, coffee and paw-paw; the Princes of Wales Conservatory contains ten climatic zones from steamy rain forest to arid desert. In the spring and summer you can find rhododendrons from the Himalayas, roses from Europe and the Far East and a woodland covered in bluebells.

The Chelsea Physic Garden was established by the Society of Apothecaries in 1673 as a garden entirely of healing plants. Located on three and a half acres in the center of town, it has one of the oldest rock gardens in Europe, an herb garden with culinary and medicinal plants, botanical order beds, glasshouses, rare plants and the largest olive tree grown outdoors in Britain. The new "Garden of World Medicine" exhibit shows the medicinal use of plants by tribal societies.

paris rooms

So many choices, or so we thought. We had unwittingly scheduled our trip during the busiest week in Paris (mid-October). The city was booked. We finally managed to reserve the last room in Paris at an old favorite, The Hotel Royal Monceau. But in the course of our research we uncovered some gems we might otherwise have overlooked — the Lancaster, a subtly elegant boutique hotel, and the flashy Hotel Meurice, one of Paris's great palaces — opposite in character from each other and quite different from where we stayed.

Last time I visited the Monceau, I literally ran into Bono of U2. Not surprising, since the hotel has for more than 70 years hosted everyone from rock stars to royalty. The grand hotel looked just as I remembered it ... the great marble entrance hall laden with antiques and crystal chandeliers in an aura of French luxury. Besides having a world class health spa/fitness center and lavish indoor pool, top-rated restaurants, bar and business amenities, the Monceau is just steps from the Champs Elysees and within walking distance of the prestigious fashion boutiques of Faubourg Saint Honore. *Quelle chance* that we were able to get a room here, albeit small and pricey, on such short notice.

Also off the Champs Elysees but in the opposite direction, is The Lancaster, one of the Leading Small Hotels of the World. Understated elegance, quiet sophistication, grown-up glamour — the Lancaster is where people go to *not* be seen. Filled with original art, artifacts and antiques, it feels more like the private home of a connoisseur than a hotel. From carefully chosen fabrics like Toiles de Jouy, Damasse and Indienne to the specially woven Braquentie carpets and basins hewn from solid marble, each of the 60 rooms has been painstakingly restored. The dining room overlooks a botanic garden with flowers and plants brought in from five continents. Inside and out, The Lancaster is an oasis ... quality over ostentation.

For high profile glamour, hang your chapeau at the Hotel Meurice with the likes of Coco Chanel, Salvador Dali, Placido Domingo, the Dukes and Duchesses of Windsor, Robert de Niro, Gianni Versace and many others. Known as the Hotel of Kings, this palace has also hosted kings and cabinet ministers, sultans and archdukes, maharajahs and princesses. Its sumptuous décor has been featured in several films, and haute couture houses including Chanel and Guy Laroche have staged fashion shows in its elaborately gilded 18th century rococo salons. The 160 rooms are soundproofed, fully appointed and filled with period furnishings and paintings from Sotheby's and Christie's. This five-star hotel wrecks of luxury — it's the Parisian *piéd a terre* of the popular and privileged.