

A Love Letter to the Luxury Hotel Bar

HISTORIC CITY HOTELS CAN BE GLAMOROUS, INDULGENT AND CHARMINGLY SNOBBY. VISITING THEIR BARS PROVIDES GREAT CONVERSATION, GOOD DRINKS AND A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO A CITY'S HISTORY, WITHOUT THE ROOM BILL, WRITES **CHARLIE SQUIRE**.



My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.” These were the words of Oscar Wilde on his deathbed in Paris before he lost the battle with both the wallpaper and meningitis, dying in his hotel room in late November 1900. The offending decor resided at what is now called L’Hôtel in Paris, described in Wilde’s obituary in *The New York Times* as “a small, obscure hotel in the Latin Quarter of Paris”. I’ve arrived at L’Hôtel after a particularly long day in the French capital: first, a hunt for orthopaedic insoles for my irresponsibly heavy leather Mary Janes, swiftly installed before dashing off to Le Marais to ogle at the beautiful vintage clothing in the musty basements of the neighbourhood’s innumerable thrift stores.

I whip out my phone on the metro to L’Hôtel as the train crosses the Seine, capturing a very pink sunset behind the river and the Eiffel Tower. I have a pretentious predilection for these luxury, historic hotel cocktail bars. Of course, I can’t afford them as a habit – I am a writer, after all.

It seems like every city has its share of new cocktail bars that serve overpriced Aperol spritzes and espresso martinis in repurposed buildings with exposed brick and neon lights. Sometimes, everything just seems so plastic. All the clothes in the store made from synthetic fabrics. The wrappers on the pre-made sandwiches in the chain cafe. And the claw clip keeping my hair out of my face. Things feel cheap, impermanent, decontextualised – empty. I don’t want trendiness or Instagrammability. I want specificity. I want history. I want conversation. I want to pay more for an experience that offers something richer; I want excellent eavesdropping on the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie.

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L’Hôtel delivers on these aesthetic requirements with its velvet curtains, tasselled chairs and photographs of Stanley Kubrick at the bar. It delivers on the cocktails, too. When I order the eponymous drink, the bartender explains that it’s been continuously served in this bar since its opening well over a century ago. It’s a strange comfort to know if I were ever to run into the ghosts of Wilde or Kubrick, I’d know how to start the small talk.

In June, my companion Charles and I follow the Baltic by train through Gdansk, Warsaw, Vilnius and then Riga. We walk back to our hotel, over the canals in Riga’s central park, passing by well-groomed King Charles Spaniels on their evening walks and less-well-groomed Brits on their bacchanalian bachelor parties. We spot a large, stately building adorned with flags past the park. And I check on our reflection in the darkened shop windows to ensure proper attire before taking Charles’s hand and dragging him into the building.

The sign outside says Grand Palace Hotel. The bar smells like stale tobacco and wood. There’s a group of men in suits smoking cigars in the corner and the barstools are covered in a well-worn blue leather. When we sit, I see a painting on the wall, a half-finished John Singer Sargent portrait. Everything is classic. Sturdy. The opposite of plastic.

The only things more charming than the decor in these hotel bars are the bartenders. I am, by my undeniably American nature, incredibly chatty, and I interrogate our bartender with questions about the hotel and Riga and Latvia as a whole. He tells us that the building housed the Central Latvian Bank before it was a hotel. Its international history continued after the bank moved out, as the hotel and its bar have been the preferred meeting place >>

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Wilde’s Lounge is a favourite hang out for artists, actors and hip Parisians; Enjoy classic cocktails at PILS Bar; At the Grand Palace Hotel Riga, Latvia. OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): Wilde’s Lounge has long captured the charm and glamour of the Left Bank in Paris; The K Bar in Kensington is a sophisticated space to enjoy a drink; Pull up at PILS Bar in the Grand Palace Hotel Riga, a place for business and pleasure.*



PHOTOGRAPHY @SORTIRAPARIS (WILDE’S LOUNGE DETAIL); @LATEEF.PHOTOGRAPHY (THE K BAR NEGRONI)





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The K Bar is an upscale drinking den at The Kensington in London; Enjoy the theatre of choosing a glass of Champagne from the trolley wheeled to your table by a waiter at The K Bar; Like the hotel it's housed in, The K Bar is warm and lovely and one of the best hotel bars for a drink in the capital of the United Kingdom.*

for businessmen and diplomats ever since. The bartender tells us about how the country changed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the Euro, offering a street-level account of some of Europe's largest geopolitical changes in the last half-century. When it comes time for the last call, we ask for something distinctly Latvian and are served Riga Black Balsam, a strong, syrupy liquid that tastes like an alpine Manischewitz. I ask if it would be possible to get a half shot, and he responds: "For you? Anything is possible."

Everywhere I go, I bring my notebook, scrawling in quick cursive when I see something I love or hate or don't understand. I love people. I find everyone endlessly fascinating, if only for the fact that they have lived a life that is entirely separate from mine. I order a gimlet when we sit down in The K Bar at The Kensington, in London, a room of sultry lighting and deliciously dark wood panelling from the 1970s. Charles asks what's in a gimlet, and instead of giving him an answer, I issue a history lesson. The gimlet, I tell him, one of the oldest, simplest and best cocktails, was allegedly invented by a British naval surgeon to prevent sailors from getting scurvy as they traversed the ocean seeking to expand their empire – hence the term 'limey' for the English. Every human object and place has a history, and I want to be thoughtful and connected to the lineage of even the most quotidian encounters as I move through the world.

We smile and chat with the waiters, taking unspoken pride in being the youngest patrons in the room by at least two decades. With our drinks come bowls of olives and almonds, which we eat a bit too voraciously to maintain the illusion that we are the hotel bar's ideal clientele. This bar, with its library of beautiful, leather-bound and completely unread books, is a space for projection, a playground of pretend. I feel a bit insecure at moments, realising I don't have the

posture of the upper classes, but then I realise the hotel is playing its part, too: while its decor suggests both Victorian-era decadence and mid-century modern chicness, The Kensington opened in 2009.

It would be a misconception to characterise these spaces as 'stuffy', unless you were referring to the armchairs. Certainly, there is an air of exclusion baked into their upper crusts. But they are an experience – one not just of eating or drinking but of engaging in a space, in a culture, in a history. Paris, Riga and London hold complex histories, and sitting at the bar it is just as easy to imagine oneself sitting next to a colonialist as an artist. But this is not a discomfort that needs to be suppressed, rather, it is a fundamental aspect of travel and empathy, an endemic ambience that cannot be gathered from literature or television. What is so special about these hotels is that they feel so specific to their locations, for better and for worse, offering an embodied sense of connection to a city's cultural and political history to the visitor that is open to feeling it. The luxury hotel bar is best paired with a visit to the history museum and the knowledge of where a city's wealth and identity come from. You will sit among beautiful things, taste beautiful drinks, see beautiful people and, if you are anything like me, you will furrow your brow as you scan the wine list to hide the fact that you'll inevitably order the second-cheapest one. ■



PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON BROWN (THE K BAR KENSINGTON)