

# A Personal Inquiry Into the Nature Of Some Hotel Rooms Overseas

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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*Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic of The New York Times, knows hotels at home and abroad both as an observer of their architecture and décor, and as a frequent hotel guest. On a recent architectural working tour of Europe and the Middle East, she lived temporarily in eight hotels in five countries. Upon her return, she set down these highly subjective impressions of the eight hotels, written from her double perspective as a touring architectural critic and an architecturally aware tourist.*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is going to be an interior travelogue—not of the landscape of the soul, but of the nature of some hotel rooms. I am not going to tell you about the glories of Delphi, since they are well chronicled, but of the glories of the Amalia Hotel—if you stay there overnight, as you should, rather than take the one-day trip from Athens that is a form of tourist masochism. Come with me not to the Istanbul bazaar, but to the Istanbul Hilton.

We will go to eight hotels in five countries, and if you stay with me to the end, the reward is that paragon of hosteleries, Claridge's in London, which is undoubtedly where we tourists will go, if we're good, when we die.

Hotels are as varied as humanity. And tastes, as they say, are *non disputandum*. So let me make my requirements clear: First, I travel in comfort, preferably in luxury. This is because I am a working journalist of the non-heroic breed, and since each day must

ingredients of comfort and pleasure. You have all this, still, at the Istanbul Hilton. Built 14 years ago, it has become a modern classic. Designed by one of the better United States concerns, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, known for the corporate splendor of skyscrapers such as Chase Manhattan, it achieves a level that was not often repeated in later Hilton ventures.

There are no cheap tricks, no showy gimmicks. Just quality. (Hotels play the biggest architectural shell game of the century.) The taste and expertise employed at the Istanbul Hilton are conspicuous and timeless. Recently, the associated Turkish architect, Sedat H. Eldem, added a wing that follows the original formula.

The formula consists of spacious rooms and public areas of impressively elegant size and height, glass-walled to the view of the Bosphorus. The simple, modern furnishings and fittings detailed in local brass, copper and faience stress a serene and sophisticated contemporaneity. There is none of the artsy-craftsy decorative corn that is supposed to reflect local arts and does nothing but debase them.

The rooms in the building's slender, superbly sited arc face the city on one side and the Bosphorus on the other, with window-walled balconies that take full advantage of a vista as magical as the name and history of the Golden Horn.

In our quarters, the beds were comfortable, the lights good, the air-conditioning silent and efficient, the bathroom large and well fitted. Room service was prompt and immaculate.

The menu was the characteristic, inescapable "Continental," with a notice-

degree of kindness, calls the King David conventional in character and operation, competent but casual.

But I must point out that room service comes, only after long waits. The food is kosher and usually virgin of seasoning or interest. But the chicken soup (consommé, the waiter insisted irritably) is fine, or would be if it were hot, and so are the fresh fruits and blintzes.

There are complicated systems of seniority about getting a rear room with the picture-book view of the old, walled city of Jerusalem. Somehow, the glorious vista seems unrelated to the board-in-house banality that frames it.

Our room, on one of the new top floors, was pleasantly furnished, but slightly too small for a couple with a tendency to collect books, brochures and maps. The bathroom, not overly large, was otherwise satisfactory. The price was \$25.75 with service.

The Tel Aviv Hilton is one of the new and better Hiltons; it was completed in 1965 by one of Israel's leading architects, Jacov Rechter. Hilton knows a great deal about sitting, room and bath requirements and the mechanics of servicing. This knowledge can be lumped into an ordinary commercial box, and often is, or it can be used with high professionalism and for heightened pleasure, as here. The Tel Aviv Hilton is a very good place to stay, unless you are allergic to Hiltons.

The Tel Aviv version is a 16-story angled tower, which provides panoramic views of the Mediterranean and the city, with perfect sun and light orientation for all of its balconied rooms on both sides. By contrast, the equally new wing of the Excelsior in Dubrovnik benefits by none of these lessons. Only one of its three facades has balconies, and you must specify that you want one. Only one outlook views the old walled town as well as the sea, and the sun beats in mercilessly.

Design extras in the Tel Aviv Hilton include a lobby area so intelligently planned that the milling public part around the desk does not interfere with a large but secluded lounge that still provides the dying amenities of drinks, coffee, tea and cakes to the nostalgic strains of "Manhattan" on piano and violin.

There is a bar that trades the usual rubber-stamp gloom for an intimate, skylit court. Clerestory windows placed high in the lobby give light, height and scale to what is customarily a tunnel.

Furnishings are standard Hilton modern in that they tend toward overscaled pottery lamps, a cut below the architectural level. There are small aggravations such as night tables with fake drawer handles that clip you as you retire. (Between this and the bed frames in the Grande Bretagne in Athens—they reach out and kick you as you pass—I spent a good part of the trip black and blue.)

But the bathroom sparkles, with a marble-topped lavatory providing ample surface for his-and-her toiletries, and a full wall mirror. The room is more than adequately bright and comfortable in conventional Hilton style. (Plumbing note: We encountered no bidets in our three Israeli hotels.)

The big plus at the Tel Aviv Hilton is good management and service, something as unpredictable as tomorrow. Day and night maid service smoothers you in towels, wash cloths, lemon-scented soap and turned-back beds.

Room service, providing palatable food, is a good, updated version of the international Grand Hotel tradition, with plenty of clean silver (Mr. Hilton: Have you looked at the Palmer House silver in Chicago lately?) and crisp damask. There is a fresh carnation in your room every Friday evening, with a label wishing you "Shabat Shalom." The tariff was \$25.50, with service and view.

In a dreamlike sequence, we spent one night at the Desert Inn in Beersheba, where the arid Negev wilderness and the *chamsin* wind press against an outpost, or oasis, of motel culture. With the familiar totems of bar, grill and swimming pool, it is like a motel translated into a foreign language by someone who didn't speak the original and built from a description to someone else



who had never seen one. In its way, it is really quite nice, its swimming pool a brave, definite gesture against the desert.

Our large and comfortable bed-sitting room had split-wood blinds to pull across the bed alcove. There were blankets and rugs of dark, striped local wools; the bath was done in a rubbery pink tile with bright orange mastic around the tub and a popping fluorescent light. Cheerful young men brought trays of sliced-egg sandwiches.

The corridors were decorated with photographs of Bedouins, and a band with a strong Israeli-rock beat entertained the Sunday evening crowd, as well as guests in bed. It cost \$13.30 a day for two.

The Grande Bretagne in Athens is an institution dear to the hearts of many travelers. It has a gorgeously grand lobby and armies of service people of extremely pleasant nature. It is on the noisiest square in the city.

We had two rooms. The first, on the street, was a nice double bed-sitting room with separating portières, but the din cracked your skull if you opened a window or door. Everything was quite Olympian, from what seemed like 16-foot ceilings to the height of the shower rod in the all-marble bath. Handfuls of hooks had been glued to the bathroom walls apparently at random, a boon for drip-dry Americans.

Unable to stand the noise, we switched to an inside court and received a miserably small room in Grand Rapids style that was just about large enough for one. But it was mercifully quiet.

It was also costly, for Greece, being slightly more than \$25 a day. When we suggested that it might be cheaper than the first room, we were told that the first was actually dearer but that we were only being charged the back-room rate for the whole week's stay. (I always believe in asking.)

The room-service waiter obviously ran to Marathon for each order. A meal extended for hours, chiefly for return trips with forgotten dishes. One night, he never came back.

Service was brisker in the rear, but the food was expensive and average, to put it kindly. Would you believe no baklava? The Grande Bretagne, doyenne of European Grand Hotels, is achieving the impossible: the careless, casual im-

personality of the American commercial variety.

How shall I tell you about the Amalia in Delphi? Let me count the ways. It sits on the summit of a flower-drowned hill pervaded by the rich scent of golden gorse, and nestles into a slope that goes down, down and down to the blue bay of Corinth. Above is snow-capped Parnassus.

Your room and balcony face the view, with a wall of louvers or glass that slides fully open to it. From layout to furniture, fabrics, colors, linens and lamps, this is a completely and competently designed hotel. Even the fresh flower arrangements are just right.

Nothing is "designed down" to popular taste. The standards are uncompromisingly high, and the result is a perfect adjunct and complement to the timeless mythological landscape. The working assumption has obviously been that it is as easy to design a good hotel as a bad one.

One interesting note, a fact I discovered when awakened by late-braying donkeys: The electricity apparently goes off during the night. The tariff for all this delight was \$9.25 for two, with very decent meals about \$8 extra per person a day.

Dubrovnik, that gem of a walled Renaissance town on the Yugoslav edge of the Adriatic, is having a hotel boom. The two main hosteleries, the Excelsior and the Argentina, have new wings. The style of the architecture and décor is socialist modern, given to vastness, regularity, rubber plants, and velours overstuffed furniture in rows.

The rooms are small. Ours at the Excelsior had corner-angled beds tucked into it, and we moved by plotting ahead, like chess. Everything was calculated to minimums.

The tiny closet was relieved somewhat by built-in drawers on one wall. The bidet-less bath, primitively put together, was clean and satisfactory. In the West, we would call it excellent economy accommodations.

Meals were boarding-house style (pension or demi-pension) in a dining room that stretched squarely to infinity. The hotel was efficiently run, and the food, a cross between Yugoslav home cooking and Continental clichés, good enough and well served. Any American hotel

would stage a coup by raiding the service staff of the Excelsior dining room.

The Argentina, next door, offers a far more pleasant outdoor dining room by the sea and of more personal proportions.

Socialist room service is prompt and impersonal. Maid service is fine. Except for the stateroom-like squeeze of the quarters, it is all eminently satisfactory for an even more satisfactory rate of about \$22 a day for two, including meals. Service, curiously, is not included.

Claridge's costs, and is worth, about \$44 a day for a double room with service. This paragon of hotels does not like publicity. Let me just mention, then, C.....'s accommodations vary from royal suites to single bedrooms, and all are serviced with impeccability, a word that must have been coined there.

Its bathrooms have polished plumbing fixtures like the engine room of the old Queen Elizabeth. Its room-service waiters, on 24-hour duty, spring from behind the door at your call. They welcome the challenge of soufflés. For anything substantial, two do the job.

There is an extra dimension at Claridge's. The generosity of portions, the sparkling crystal bowls for fruits, the extra-large cups at breakfast, the perfectly brewed tea, the rich, dark coffee in its double-jointed brown pot, the twin pillows, the sheets that are smoother and crisper than anywhere else—the list is without end. Add the correct, but warm, concern for your welfare, and the simple assumption that perfection is normal.

A Claridge's room is what the movie makers of the Thirties had in mind, if you can imagine MGM excesses translated into perfect taste. White walls, lovely lighting, room-length, mirrored his-and-her armoire, hedonistically comfortable beds, hardware obviously removed and repolished at each repainting. Flowers when you arrive, and a cold bottle of Malvern water on the dressing table. (All right, champagne is better, but the Malvern is on the house.)

Downstairs, the lobby is grand and elegant without reference to any Louis, from XIV to XVI. There is, again, a touch of the moderne in a traditional ambience that features fresh flower arrangements measured in feet, not inches; a sweeping stairway obviously meant for a top-hatted Fred Astaire and a fireplace that burns small, fat logs in season.

In the lounge where tea is served, guests sink into the velvet-covered down cushions and disappear. When Claridge's Christmas card comes, showing it all in a tasteful water-color sketch, you cry.

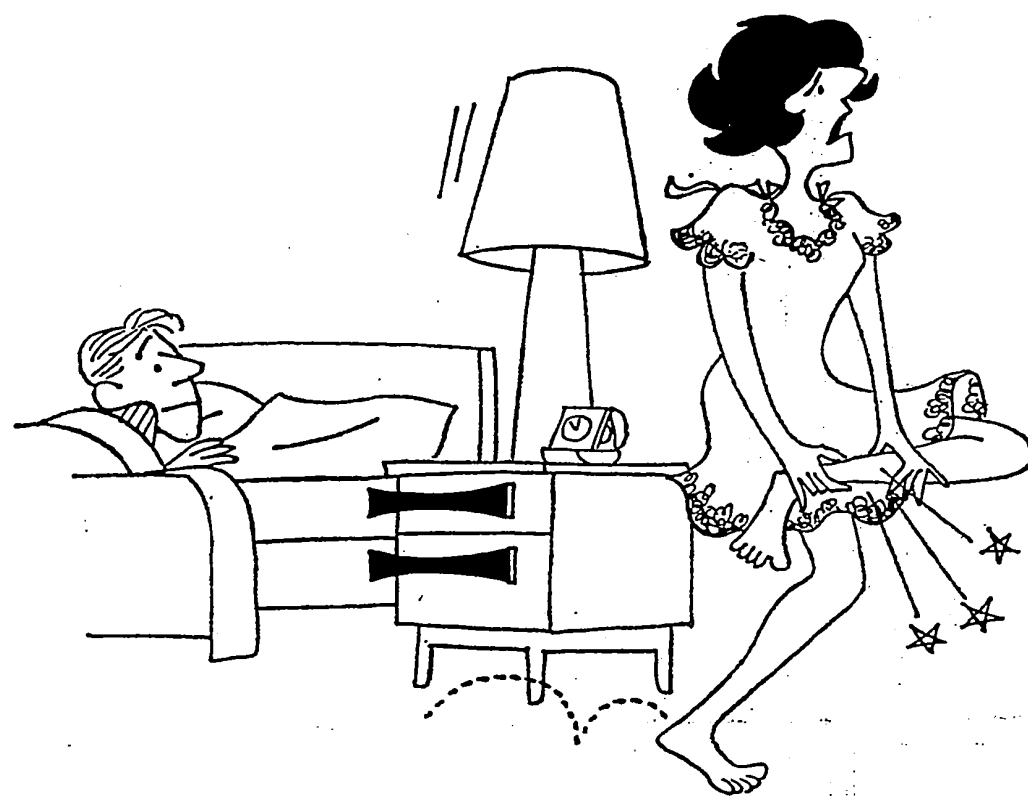
We arrived, travel weary with travel stomachs, on a Sunday afternoon. We rang for the instant waiter.

"I have not eaten in days," I explained weakly, "and would like something that won't fight back."

"Would madam care for a pudding?" the waiter suggested. My husband, a pudding man (you are or you aren't), brightened and asked what kind.

"Any kind you want," was the reply. "We'll make it for you now."

A half-hour later, a huge, warm, fragrant brown baking dish was borne in with sparkling silver and starched linen, and its contents served in style. At Claridge's, tapioca pudding can be divine.



serve as two—imagine, if you will, that, after you have reached the point of exhaustion from a highly technical kind of sightseeing, you must then proceed to write about it—I am fussy about the plumbing and the necessity of room service. They are survival for me.

Therefore, the category of this hotel tour is de luxe and first class. By the time I hit the bed and the typewriter, I've had my local color. I want to ring the bell and be pampered, preferably with a view.

On our recent trip, my husband and I sampled Hiltons in Istanbul and Tel Aviv; in Israel, we also stayed at the Lindy's of the Levant, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, and a mirage of a motel in Beersheba, the Desert Inn. We were at the Grande Bretagne in Athens and the Amalia in Delphi.

In Yugoslavia we stayed at the Excelsior in Dubrovnik and snooped the neighboring Argentina. Our last stop was you-know-where in London. The differences in this supposedly homogeneous category of luxe hotels could give one the bends.

To particulars, then: This may seem to reflect my professional prejudices, but I consider it a basic fact of life that when a hotel chain uses a really good architect it gets a really good hotel. The proof is in the Hiltons. Axiom No. 2 is that a hotel is no better than its service. Add good service to a well-designed and well-built hotel and you have the definition of quality and the

able dearth of Turkish delights, an error of judgment and cuisine in Hilton hotels everywhere. Even the Excelsior in Dubrovnik, a kind of super-socialist pension with "Continental" aspirations, has a "daily national dish" to liven things up.

But I am often grateful, when working under pressure, for a simple chicken sandwich, and they have not learned to ruin the bread and butter anywhere except in the United States.

In the entry of our Istanbul room was a combination built-in wardrobe and closet with sliding mirrored doors, panels and lights that make the versions in most hotels look like the hack adaptations that they are. There is nothing like a little competent architectural thought and detailing for an extra dimension of comfort and good looks. The price for two for this superior product was \$19.50, including service.

Going from there to the King David Hotel in Jerusalem involves some trauma. The latter building is a bulky, ugly box that has just added two new floors that do not help the city's historic skyline. It has a circular entrance drive that somehow keeps pedestrians and automobiles in a perpetual state of conflict.

The hotel's public spaces are in a state of decorative transition from neo-Biblical to neo-coffee shop, and the lobby is always crowded.

Service is perfunctory and pragmatic. My husband, who is given to reticence and understatement as well as to a large

