

COLUMNS

## Ritz Paris: The world's finest hotel?

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*Check-in or check-out?*

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After a closure of more than three-and-a-half years, Ritz Paris reopened on June 6 following a multimillion-dollar revamp.

The New York Times reported the Ritz renovation cost \$224 million, but according to Ritz spokesman Matthieu Goffard, it was much more. The Wall Street Journal put it in the region of \$450 million. Whatever the cost, it looks and feels very much the same as before.

We understand that this was the intention as if it has been refitted for those seeking times past. There are changes, some immediately apparent, but most are subtle.

The questions we ask ourselves are: Is it all too safe? Do we really want those gilded swans-head taps we could not wait to see the back of some years ago? Do we like the color peach for towels and bathrobes? Taste is subjective and many Ritz aficionados will rejoice in the fact that so little appears to have changed.

Chain of thought

As you step out from your limo onto the Place Vendôme, arguably the most beautiful location in Paris, the porticoed entrance of the Ritz is just as it always has been, only sharper. New white canopied blinds, the doormen's uniforms, the best of any we have seen in Paris.

Inside, in what is a lighter space, the blue and gold-carpeted corridor beyond the lobby is immediately familiar. To the right, reception and concierge desks, to the left, the Bar Vendôme.

Much of the original paved patio is now taken up with a neo-Victorian styled, teal-blue conservatory accented by black "street style" lamps, with vast potted ferns concealing outdoor heaters.

This provides a year-round, inside-outside, all-day dining venue maximizing on table count, but the design and detailing is incongruous with the rest of the hotel's style. At first glance it seems more luxury chain hotel than privately owned palace.



*Bar none*

Across from Bar Vendme, an elegant, pine-paneled library (the Salon Proust, open from 2.30 p.m. 6 p.m.) is set back from the main gallery.

The sumptuous furnishing style, with buttoned and pleated damask and velvet upholstery, Louis XVI desk, ormolu wall lights and classic floral display is timeless and elegant.

Surprising to see faux books on the shelves but, nevertheless, this is a perfect place to relax and retreat from city life, to read or maybe take an afternoon tea.

At the far end of the main gallery foyer, L'Espadon, the Ritz's main restaurant, is supremely soign, perfectly refreshed and immaculately appointed.

A large area of the formal paved garden has been glazed over with a conservatory matching that at Bar Vendme. It provides an informal dining room extension, where lighter dishes are served throughout the day.



*Lush experience*

Named Les Jardins de L'Espadon, it is reminiscent of the kind of room you find in extended country house hotels.

Beyond L'Espadon the long, narrow gallery of boutiques and showcases is slicker than before, lighter and altogether more inviting. Glazed doors along one side open onto the new garden, with a retro-inspired soundtrack gently playing jazz and lounge music.

The gallery includes a number of Italian fashion names yet would have lent itself better as the perfect showcase for top French heritage brands.

Bar none?

At the end of the shopping gallery a sitting room lobby-lounge area gives way to the world-famous Hemingway Bar, presided over by master mixologist Colin Field, often referred to as the world's best bartender. It is small, intimate,

wood-paneled, with only the lights and curtains having been replaced.

We love the memorabilia, including handwritten letters from Hemingway to his wife on Ritz-headed notepaper.

Cocktails are excellent, although pricey, starting at 30 euros. But this is the Ritz, after all, and they do juice the tomatoes freshly for each Bloody Mary a Hemingway favorite.

Opposite is the Ritz Bar for those not lucky enough to secure one of the few coveted tables or bar stools at the Hemingway or at times when the intimate space becomes too animated.

We had very high expectations of the first Chanel Spa and imagined it was going to be magnificent and fully Chanel in every way, but it fell short of our expectations.

The spa is still branded the Ritz Club and neither looks nor feels much different from before, other than the area dedicated to beauty, which is managed by a team of Chanel-uniformed therapists. This features the Chanel collections of skincare and cosmetics.

A pair of semi-circular black wrought-iron balustraded staircases sweeps down to the pool area where white sun loungers are laid out on the white-marble floor around the neo-classic pool. The treatment area bears some of the Chanel trademark with its black-and-gold decor. We had expected more branding, more of the full Chanel experience.

Overall, there is certain elegance about white flowers, especially white roses and hydrangeas set against topiary. Designer Jean Mus has created a beautiful new formal garden for Ritz Paris along one side of the gallery of boutiques. It is a triumph in urban landscape.

A long rectangular lawn bordered by avenues of pleached Italian oak trees in large Versailles-styled containers, a profusion of white roses and begonias, with small ornamental pools and fountains at either end of the rectangle. Alcove-recesses make for a delightful spot to relax in what is a very calm and peaceful "rus in urbe."

However, it is a pity that there is no service out here in what would be the perfect place to enjoy a glass of Champagne on a warm day.

Energetic new and relatively young general manager Christian Boyens, who we remember fondly from The Peninsula Beverly Hills in Los Angeles, is intent on rejuvenating the style and image of the hotel.

However, it is still long-time head honcho Frank Klein, above him, who reigns supreme. It is Mr. Klein who will dictate how this iconic landmark will move forward.



*Food for thought*

WHATEVER EVOLVES, it was interesting to see that during our July visit, in the difficult period not long after the awful terrorist events took place in the city, Ritz Paris was impressively busy.

However, the world's most famous hotel had only opened a month earlier, with much anticipation and publicity following a long closure. Understandably, everybody is keen to see and experience the new Ritz.

The question is: do we like it? The answer is yes and no. Does it hold the position as number one in Paris palaces? Probably yes, but with certain caveats depending on who it is for, and when they are visiting, and then it comes down to which accommodation to choose.



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