

As friends are celebrating milestones, what better excuse to attend their celebrations and get a little more travel under our waist cinchers. It was the perfect time to mark off that *travel wishlist* to many urban escapes and fine-tuned retreats – LONDON was calling and we made sure to get highly acquainted.

Before we even land in London, we get lucky – as we descend into Heathrow, the sun peeks through the clouds and to our surprise, graces us with its presence throughout our stay. Surely London is more beautiful when you can skip your way through the city, stand in line at the museum and sit on a bench in the park for lunch. Still, even with raindrops and wind spells, this metropolis ticks all the city escape boxes.

Captivating beauty

The tube takes us to the city centre as we flee the underground world at Picadilly Circus, to find our first tea house – the utterly stunning and mesmerising Hotel Café Royal, nestled between elegant Mayfair and vibrant Soho. Just off the square where Eros greets us, there is an assemblage of niche boutiques and brand stores on Regent Street. The slightly diffused entry of the hotel only captures our attention as we get personally greeted by our knights in shining suits and top ▶

The Grand Hotels of London

From chic and elegant to quirky and vibrant, *La Femme* visits some of London's A-list hotels to get acquainted





► hats; the doormen of Café Royal. Our luggage finds its way in and before we know it, the elevator doors magically open to our wonderland for our stay.

Tales of long-gone days

In recent years, this London original has undergone a grand renovation, leaving historic details as part of its theme to tell a story and rekindle a feeling of nostalgic romance. A total design sensibility and a distinctly classical personality are clear from the moment guests step through the door. The Grade II-listed building has been transformed into a contemporary abode, with unfazed yet charismatic architectural elements, such as floor-to-ceiling marble bathroom walls, herringbone patterned parquet floors, original stonework window surrounds and modern metal-framed doors. From the rich classical gilding of the grand Empire Suite to the original 16th century wooden panels, beams and fireplace in the intimate rooms of the Tudor Suite, all have been created with unique aesthetic and character. The Regent Suite is our haven and as we take in the opulence of the suite (the marble standalone bath surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows is a showstopper), we are stunned with the utter beauty of simplicity. The suite exudes luxury and calm which comes as a treat as Picadilly Circus is literally right on our doorstep and gives a beautiful glimpse of London life – at a fast pace. Before we head out, we sit down ►

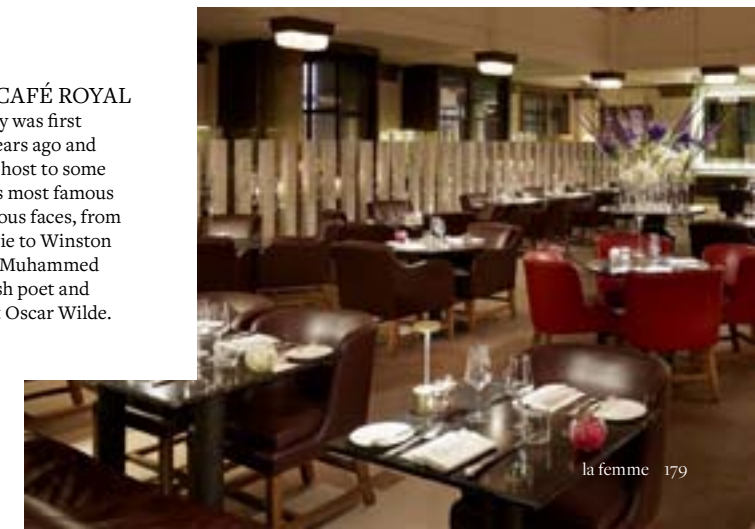


“The man who can DOMINATE a London dinner table can *dominate the world.*”

– OSCAR WILDE

HOTEL CAFÉ ROYAL

This beauty was first built 150 years ago and has played host to some of history's most famous and notorious faces, from David Bowie to Winston Churchill, Muhammed Ali and Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde.



Savoir Vivre

► for a typical English breakfast in Ten Room. Overlooked by the artwork of street graffiti artist Seen from The Club Lounge, the place reflects an almost 1920s feel, where – if we didn't know any better – we'd expect the waiters to start a jazz band and the waitresses would turn into flappers, dancing the Charleston.

Hotel Café Royal is by all means an impressive hotel – the staff is eager to regale us with the legendary hotel tales. We feel pampered with excellent service and were made to feel at home from the first moment we entered the rotating doors. From the doormen, to the receptionist of The Club to the butler (who is complimentary with the suites), all make quick connections between our interests, cultural wishes, even our London knowledge – to then present us with an array of on-demand, in-house options. Some favourites were the option to book a personal shopper, to the personalisable Akasha Spa menu. Make sure you book London's first dessert-only restaurant, where we can choose à la carte as well as several menu options, such as the Childhood Memories menus, comprising chef Sarah Barber's take on nostalgic favourites such as rhubarb and custard.

High-heeled tour of town

We spend the afternoon roaming around Regent ►



“I cannot STAND people who do not take food *seriously*.”

– OSCAR WILDE

DOHA > LONDON

In 2010, Mohamed Al-Fayad, Chairman of Harrod's since 1985, sold the famous London store to the Qatar Wealth Fund for £1.5 billion. The area around Harrod's is colloquially referred to as Little Doha because of the large amount of Qatari visitors and cars seen around the neighbourhood.



► Street and as the sun is shining we pop by Buckingham Palace, a short walk away, as no London visit is complete without a visit to the Royal Family’s abode. We take the Tube to the more touristic heart of the city to see Leicester and Trafalgar Squares and pause in between at The National Portrait Gallery, which allows us to soak up the type of art we so dearly miss – all for free – and leaves us in awe with the diversity of canvases, torsos and pictures capturing centuries of different artistic sensibilities. The next morning we set off to play tourist, viewing the Prime Minister’s residence at Number 10, taking in the solemnity and history of Westminster Abbey and stopping by Big Ben for a selfie. Our next stop is the grammatically named The Ampersand Hotel in South Kensington.

Leisurely yet ladylike

Just off the South Kensington Metro Station, in a quieter street, this small luxury hotel is a delicate feast for beauty-hungry eyes. Simple room designs reflect the neighbourhood’s treasures through the five themes of botany, music, geometry, ornithology and astronomy. As the hotel is within walking distance of sites such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National History Museum, Royal Albert Hall and the Kensington Gardens, we truly have hit the cultural jackpot.

The rooms are stylish and simple, except for the completely overwhelming majestic headboard; the television in the bathroom and complimentary minibar are sure bonuses. Breakfast, as well as brunch and afternoon tea, are served in Aperó, located in the basement of the hotel. The coffee is strong, whilst the freshly squeezed juices are vibrant in colour and taste. We opt for the à la carte menu, but could have been easily persuaded by the buffet of homemade yumminess – granola, sweet and savoury muffins, banana bread and breakfast quiches. The poached eggs are soft as we asked for and the ricotta pancakes with vanilla poached rhubarb are a seared into our culinary memories. The restaurant gives us a street vibe with its brass lighting elements, wooden tables and plush couches and finishes it off with an industrial looking bar surrounded by tiled and brick walls. People from the neighbourhood pop in for a coffee and the evenings have a lovely community atmosphere with a combination of Londoners who pass by for a quick taste of the (vegetarian) sharing menu or cocktail menu – both created with the local resident in mind – though after a long day’s strolling through streets decorated with Victorian façades townhouses and darling boutiques, these non-Londoners certainly appreciated it.

“The English LANGUAGE is like London: proudly barbaric but deeply civilised.”

– STEPHEN FRY

We saunter to the posh Chelsea neighbourhood (home to the popular rich kids TV programme *Made in Chelsea*) for the day. The Conran Shop on Sloane Street is a sure hit for all the senses, located in Michelin House – a former Michelin tyre depot – and tickles the interior designer tastebuds, while the Bibendum Oyster Bar at the front of the building surely does the same to our taste buds. The sun is shining and the air is crisp and fresh; streets are filled with friendly chatter, trees blossom and the birds fly from tree to tree to kit out their nests. We settle in for a visit to the Saatchi Gallery and ponder about life on the park benches in front of this inspiring place. On our way back, there is no chance we’ll miss out on a classic gelato from Amorino – the lush tastes of this high quality, no preservatives, no artificial flavours ice cream shop, make you wonder if you haven’t mistakenly booked a flight to Italy instead. And with that in mind we head back to South Kensington to meet our last London Belle: Kit Kemp’s Number Sixteen Hotel.

Belle of the interior design ball

Number Sixteen maintains the legacy of a previous life as a more higgledy-piggledy terraced house. The downstairs sitting rooms add a nice touch; full of colours and design features alike – vibrant birds, butterflies and flowers dominate the trend in the drawing room, whilst a black indigenous-themed room, topped off with bright yellow furniture pieces and a fully loaded Honesty Bar, where guests are free to enjoy snacks and drinks without asking, just a little honesty is required to mention your room number in the bar’s black book, welcomes you to relax and reclaim your sensibility. Equally

welcoming is the private garden – a rarity in London – with its wooden garden pergola to entertain an afternoon drink and a few benches to enjoy the rays of sunshine, if and when they appear (London’s sun being notoriously commitment-shy).

The rooms are nothing less than elegant – Kit Kemp’s eye for unique furniture pieces have generated intimate rooms where she has smartly made the most of the shapes and architectural obstacles – our bathroom is a sunken serene oasis flooded with light just off the bedroom, whilst an aged armoire hides the minibar.

The conservatory-styled restaurant (with 24-hours room service, might we add), injects an ethnic edge to the otherwise classic room. Gorgeous afternoon tea is served on dazzling tableware letting each guest feel as if sophistication was added to the holiday’s itinerary. And as the day couldn’t get any better, it is time for us to explore the inner maze of London’s cultural scene – Victoria & Albert, here we come... ■

ROYAL ALBERT HALL
The first concert held in this gorgeous London landmark took place in 1871 for an audience of 7,000 people. An amateur orchestra called The Wandering Minstrels played primarily to test the building’s acoustics. Since then, it’s been the venue of choice for a host of eclectic musicians from One Direction to Plácido Domingo.



Cirque du Soleil is performing at the Hall until the end of *February*.

