

En Suite

By Jayne Cooperman

Photos courtesy of The Palmer House Hilton



The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago

There are those hotels that meet the needs of the typical traveler. They're conveniently located, reasonably priced, and offer comfy rooms with cushy mattresses, flat screens and Wi-Fi. Then there are those that do that, of course, and something more. They provide a sense of elegance, of romance, of time stopped, at least for a moment. A window to the past, a rich backstory peopled with the famous and notorious, a place to dream. The Palmer House Hilton is one of those.

A wedding present from retail pioneer, real estate magnate and urban planning visionary Potter Palmer, then 45, to Bertha Honoré, his 21 year-old bride, the Palmer House opened on September 26, 1871. In a cruel blow to romantics everywhere, it burned to the ground in the Great Chicago Fire just 13 days later.

Undaunted, Potter rebuilt, and the second Palmer House opened less than two years later. Billed as "the only fireproof hotel in the world," it was also the first to feature electric light bulbs, telephones in each room, and a steam-driven "perpendicular railroad" (the first elevator) connecting its eight floors. The lavish lodging hosted U.S. presidents, foreign heads of state, and many of the entertainment and literary luminaries of the day: Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Sarah Bernhardt and Buffalo Bill, to name just a few. So identified was it with an opulent lifestyle that it was where the lead characters in "Show Boat" went to "make believe" when times were good.

Potter died in 1902, his wife in 1918. But before her death, Bertha, a champion of women's rights, a noteworthy philanthropist, the foremost collector of Impressionist art outside of France, and the inspiration for the brownie, was planning a new venue that would reflect her heritage and love of all things French. The third Palmer House, the one that stands today, was completed in 1927 on the same site. By alternately razing sections of the old house and building parts of the new, it never closed its doors, making it "the oldest hotel in continuous operation in North America." It was purchased by Conrad Hilton in 1945, and renamed The Palmer House Hilton.

The jewel of the 25-story building's interior is, surely, the lobby. Its magnificent domed ceiling, by the French muralist Louis Pierre Rigal, is composed of 21 unique frescoes, each depicting a scene from Greek mythology. Louis Comfort Tiffany designed the 24-karat gold-dipped chandeliers, as well as the majestic Winged Angels, at 1.25 tons each the largest bronze statues he'd ever produced. The Italian marble staircase is one of only two constructed in this particular manner; the other is in London's St. Paul's Cathedral.

Renovation has been a continual process throughout the years. The lobby ceiling has been restored inch by painstaking inch by Lido Lippi, who'd undertaken a similar project for the Sistine Chapel. The Empire Room has been returned to its former gold, black and crystalline splendor; along the way, the original Tiffany door fittings, hand-crafted to match the statues, were revealed for the first time in six decades. The ballroom is the former home of the famed Gaslight Club which, from 1933 to 1978, featured the most popular and glamorous entertainers of the day: Louis Armstrong, Tony Bennett, Jack Benny, Carol Channing, Nat King Cole, Jimmy Durante, Judy Garland, Eartha Kitt and Frank Sinatra among them. (Their black and white portraits now line the walls of every floor in tribute.)

The most extensive restoration, by the third owner, Thor Equities LLC, was completed in 2009. Thor has spent \$170 million to bring the somewhat faded grande dame back to its former grandeur. Eight tons of fire escapes have been stripped from the State Street façade, exposing its classic French revival architecture at

last. Hand-forged bronze Tiffany doors sporting the signature peacock motif of Chicago's first incorporated business, jeweler C.J. Peacock, now grace the Monroe Street entrance. (The pattern is playfully reiterated in new custom carpeting throughout the hotel.) The lobby's original terrazzo floors, hidden beneath carpeting for over 40 years, have re-emerged. Guest rooms are more expansive, and decorated with the hotel's original interior design in mind: standard rooms are in rich shades of black and green in a nod to the earlier color scheme of the Empire Room, and suites are in soft pastels that echo the lobby's ceiling and floor. Ballrooms have been reconfigured and refurbished, and modern amenities like a new bar and restaurant, a 10,000 square foot gym and the luxurious Spa Chakra, have been added.



So take a seat in the lobby, gaze at the paintings on high, sip a glass of champagne, and munch on a signature brownie. And if the spirit moves you, exit through the peacock doors to the neighborhood beyond. The Art Institute of Chicago, now home to Bertha Palmer's collection of Impressionist art, is just steps away.

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