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Tea at the Ritz

A birthday celebration solidifies a writer's love for one of London's finest hotels

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By Anne Z. Cooke



London's magnificent Ritz at night

LONDON (Los Angeles Times Syndicate) -- In the pale dawn of a spring morning, guests arriving at London's Ritz Hotel see the doorman already at his post. Despite the early hour and a brisk breeze, he stands at the front entrance, pink-cheeked and cheerful.

"Good morning, ma'am, are you checking in?" he asks jovially, opening the taxi door and signaling the bellman, who rushes out and begins to unload the luggage.

Beyond the entrance, the lobby of one of London's most romantic hotels beckons, warm and bright. Spring is a perfect time for romance in London. A light breeze blows across Green Park next door, a park which by tradition has no flowers. Until 1532, when Henry VIII demolished St. James Hospital to build St. James Palace, these 53 acres (21 hectares) of slightly rolling lawn were a lepers' cemetery. The park has had many uses since then, but gardens are not one of them.

History runs in front of the hotel, as well. Piccadilly Street, one of two ancient highways leading west out of London, was named for Piccadilly Hall, the derisive nickname of the manor house that Robert Baker, a tailor, built in 1612. Baker, who had the last laugh, amassed a fortune making and selling fashionable collars called "picadils."

Modern Piccadilly is as noisy as ever, the clatter of horses and wagons replaced by the growl of traffic on asphalt. In such a setting, the Ritz, caught between urban bustle and a

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ghostly past, is hardly the place for will-o-the-wisp affairs. [stay and shop in London](#)

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But London is the place for another kind of romance, the sturdy, old-fashioned sort, an *affaire de coeur* kindled or rekindled by steaming pots of tea, plump down quilts, brightly lit store windows, noteworthy museums and theater lobbies jammed with fashionable coats and talking heads.

Tea at the Ritz: A venerable affair

In the London scheme of things, the Ritz is just a youngster. We celebrated a birthday tea party in the Ritz's Palm Court not long ago, my mother and I. Both she *and* the Ritz were 92, having entered the world in 1906.

My mother was in fine shape and feeling good. The Ritz, the same age, was also looking young, having just completed a face lift. Some work reversed earlier "improvements"; the majority restored the building's original Louis XVI decor, with its ivory-and-gold paneling, marble columns and floors, crystal and mirrors, and figures of neo-classic nymphs disporting themselves among gilded cupids. An appropriate setting, actually, to be eating cake.

Meeting us for tea was Michael Bentley, silver-haired and dapper, a spokesman and social factotum for the Ritz. Taking my elbow, he immediately suggested we order the "champagne of teas," the large-leaf Darjeeling.

"I'm the recognized authority on afternoon tea," he said, offering as proof the fact that for many years he was the general manager at Claridge's Hotel in Mayfair.

"You see?" he asked, measuring with his fingers. "The scones are a perfect size, one and one-half inches across. And they pull apart perfectly."

As the waiters hovered over the tea pots, we nibbled on cucumber, cream cheese and smoked salmon sandwiches from the bottom tier, scones from the middle tier, and cakes from the top. Our table, in the corner, was an ideal place to view the surroundings.

The Palm Court, an Edwardian version of a formal Roman garden, is built around a gold-gilded fountain in a shell-shaped grotto. Above, an enormous skylight casts muted light over ivory-hued paneled walls embellished with rococo molding and gold trim, and below the skylight, a wide trellis molding continues the garden theme.

Tea is served on round tables set with white cloths, flanked by Louis XVI



Covent Garden, a former 19th-century vegetable market, is now full of upscale shops and cafes

chairs, painted white and upholstered in blue and ivory silk florals. Only a few remained empty, a reminder that tea-time reservations are required.

Hotel, neighborhood just get classier with age

Real marble columns separated the Palm Court from the Gallery. I knew they were real: I had already rapped on one to see if it was a *trompe d'oeil* wallboard fake -- a common decorating ploy these days. The fireplaces in the hotel's 191 rooms and 14 suites are also original marble, though because of current fire laws they're purely decorative. But the tall double windows can still be opened.

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Also original are the gold wall sconces, beaded moldings, rococo shell moldings, concave ceiling cornices and crystal chandeliers. The upholstery fabrics, made in France, are of equal quality. The drapery material alone, according to the hotel's marketing office, costing \$500 a yard.

And the Ritz is lucky.

Despite the decades, the neighborhood -- at the Hyde Park end of Piccadilly Street -- is better than ever. London's toniest -- and unaffordable -- shops are a walk away, their windows an entertainment unto themselves. On the next block is John Lobb's (where a plain pair of women's calfskin loafers are \$450), and the shops in the Burlington Arcade. But you can afford a tin of tea at Fortnum & Mason's down the block; the specialty grocery was founded by Mr. Fortnum, a candle-lighter to the Queen, and Mr. Mason, a horse-and-wagon owner.

My mother had her hair done in Robert At The Ritz salon, on the seventh floor, while I exercised in the fitness center down the hall. Meanwhile, several male guests had a trim at Mr. James's, surely London's oldest and quaintest barbershop. Mr. James, who has been cutting hair for 50 years, smiled and nodded, saying that in his day, he'd "seen it all."

I could say that this particular weekend, not my first at the Ritz, was wildly romantic, but the truth is that my mother and I spent our last evening curled up under the comforter, sipping tea and playing Scrabble.

She had the time of her life wandering through museums and eating out for dinner, and I liked treating her. What better way to tell your Mother

you love her?

Next spring, though, it's my husband's turn for some spring romance.

If you go....

The Ritz, 150 Piccadilly, London W1V 9DG. For reservations, call 011-44-171-493-8181, or (800) 525-4800.

A standard room for one night is US\$360 for two: with full English breakfast for two it is \$400. Various weekend and holiday packages include such extras as theater tickets, dinner, or Champagne and flowers.

Tea at the Ritz is \$38.60 per person.

Other hotel options:

The Ritz isn't London's only great hotel. If you prefer the Mayfair area, on the north side of central London, try **Claridge's** on Brook Street. One of London's oldest hotels, it's an institution by itself.

Founded in 1803, the present brick hotel was designed by C.W. Stephens, the architect who designed Harrod's. Built in 1898, it was remodeled in the 1930s, and today combines art deco elegance with traditional English country house style.

Because Claridge's has always made a point of providing exclusivity and privacy, visiting royalty often stay here. It wouldn't be surprising if Queen Elizabeth dined here during your stay; it *would* be surprising if you knew about it.

Each of the hotel's 197 rooms and suites is different; if possible, inspect several before you decide. All have been recently redecorated. Standard double rooms start at \$490. The telephone number is 011-44-171-629-8860, fax 011-44-171-499-2210. Or book through Leading Hotels of the World at (800) 223-6800.

If Knightsbridge is your favorite area, consider **Eleven Cadogan Garden**. This 60-room hotel, created by joining two of the row houses that surround a private park, offers an intimate look at life in one of London's better residential neighborhoods. Because it feels like a home, most of the guests are repeat visitors who want low-key but upscale surroundings.

From the outside, you see only the address on the front door. Inside, a small lobby connects you to the original family parlor, now the sitting room furnished with comfortable, well-worn sofas and antique tables. In winter, a fire burns in the fireplace, and at tea time, Sherry, tea and cake are laid out on the side table.

The rooms are small but cozy, with antique furniture, down quilts, books and framed photos and paintings. Each room has a phone, computer jack and modern private bath, with tub and shower. Since there's no restaurant, the hotel offers 24-hour room service, handy if you like to order breakfast. Guests can use the fitness center next door.

Cadogan Garden is a five-minute walk from Harrod's. Double rooms start at \$232. Make reservations by phoning 011-44-171-730-3426, or fax 011-44-171-730-5217.

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