

Nights in Knightsbridge

SANDWICHED BETWEEN HARRODS AND HYDE PARK, THE BULGARI HOTEL IN LONDON IS PERFECTLY POSITIONED FOR RETAIL THERAPY, PARK ROAMING AND RELAXATION

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

“My residence in London”, reads the address on the business cards that the Bulgari Hotel has printed with my name on and left in a branded business card holder in my suite. I’ve skipped over to London for a long weekend and I’m not sure whether I’m more impressed by my new business cards or by the jar of American-style cookies baked to the perfect mid-way point between crunchy and sweet-dough. It’s difficult to stop at one, but I don’t want to ruin my indulgent afternoon tea.

The suite is satisfyingly seductive. An enormous bed is screened from the generously-proportioned room by a wooden panel incorporating a state-of-the-art TV. A cluster of charcoal-grey seating congregates in the corner, next to a retro-design cabinet. One wall is lined with wardrobes, waiting for

the paltry contents of my single suitcase. A frosted-glass door leads to the opulent bathroom with its midnight-black tub, rain shower and artfully-placed candle trio.

As I teeter along the hallway, unaccustomed to spiky heels on plush carpet, I admire the oversized vases filled with lime-green fronds which create a sense of separation akin to a luxury residential building. I click past the contemporary, 17th and 18th Century Roman silver pieces from the private Bulgari collection on display in the lobby, over to the granite-shod lounge. As I sink into a sleek black leather chair my friends pause their chatter long enough to hand me a tea menu.

Black, green, rare, flavoured and herbal teas meet and mingle on the pages. I narrow it down to a Lime Leaf herbal concoction. Before long an impeccably presented selection of finger sandwiches is set down before us, ranging from stereotypical English cucumber to delectable asparagus and preserved duck.

The luscious morsels disappear surprisingly quickly as we discuss affairs of state, quickly replaced with warm raisin scones slathered with jam and clotted cream and a three-tiered tower of pastries including red fruit tartlets, chocolate and tonka macaroons and lemon and raspberry *mille-feuille*. Considering it rude to reject any of these delicacies, we munch through as many as our rapidly expanding waistlines can handle.

In need of exercise I change into shoes appropriate for an afternoon stroll to Royal Albert Hall, a pleasant half-mile down the road. The sun peeks timidly through the clouds, casting dappled shade across the footpath which shivers in the breeze, creating a shadow-puppet theatre. The commanding rounded dome of Albert Hall takes my breath away. The distinctive exterior contains some six million red bricks and eighty thousand blocks of decorative terracotta. Above the balustraded gallery, a



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continuous eight-hundred-foot-long terracotta frieze composed of figures engaged in a range of artistic, scientific and cultural endeavours runs around the rim of the building, requiring a circuit of admiration. The heart of the Hall is the vast auditorium, covered by a glazed dome constructed of wrought iron girders. The great Henry Willis Organ resides here, with a capacity for volume that has led to its description as “The Voice of Jupiter”.

Across the road the ornate Albert Memorial glimmers in the sunshine, beckoning me over as it stretches skyward. Commissioned by Queen Victoria as a tribute to her late consort, the neo-Gothic monument features a gilded Albert seated under a pinnacle holding a catalogue of the 1851 Great Exhibition. The frieze is adorned with marble reliefs of 187 people, mostly artists, and four bronze statues depict Prince Albert’s passions and Victorian achievements in engineering, agriculture, commerce and manufacturing.

Turning away from the golden prince, I follow meandering paths through Kensington Gardens. Carved from the western section of Hyde Park, the two parks together cover hundreds of acres, the Serpentine Lake forming a natural boundary. This green escape watched over by Kensington Palace contains splendid settings around every curve, from the spectacular Italian Gardens to the Round Pond, filled with frolicking water birds.

I attempt following the signs to the Princess Diana Memorial Fountain, but they trail into nowhere. Instead the cheeky resident squirrels lead me on a merry dance as they scamper across my toes, gazing searchingly into my eyes assessing their chances of a feed. Realising I am empty handed they ferret in the flower beds. By the time I stumble across the fountain I have lost interest, my appetite returning so I return to the hotel, to meet my friend Martin for dinner.

Sitting at the base of a broad silver spiral staircase within the hotel, Il Ristorante evokes the sleek glamour of Italy, the open air environment adding energy into the casual-yet-classy ambience. Head Chef Robbie Pepin’s contemporary dishes draw on classic Italian gastronomic traditions, which our waiter Sam outlines with gusto.

Sam fetches a selection of breads and a pot of the most delicious pesto-style dip, made from grapes, nuts, anchovies and olive oil. Unable to decide on one entree, we opt for a trio of starters. The cured cold cuts are packed with flavour and the Buffalo mozzarella and tomato offers our taste buds fresh zing, but the highlight is the tender squid salad yielding to our tongues. We select the same main dish – seared lamb chops with aubergine *caponata* drizzled with *jus* - and savour every bite. The *limone di Amalfi*, a candied lemon filled with lemon-basil sorbet, accompanied by an orange tartlet keeps our taste buds tingling.

purveyors’ counters. Hampers packed with English preserves and fudges call my name and before I know it I have scrambled together enough coins to buy a box of cocoa-dusted almonds. There is something intrinsically appealing about the old-school department store, with its luxury collections, exemplary customer service, and British stiff upper lip.

The battle between retail longing and reluctant saving leaves me weary, so I make a beeline for the Bulgari Spa. The centrepiece is a pool-oasis created from sandblasted Vicenza stone, lined with green and gold-leaf glass mosaic tiles surrounded by columns. I’ve never understood the allure of lying beside an indoor pool. Until now. Only the thought of an expertly-administered body treatment drags me away from my cabana draped in sheer fabric like a royal palanquin.

Therapist Claire leads me into the treatment room and I collapse onto the massage table, ready for ninety minutes of bliss. The Signature Body Radiance treatment starts with Claire scrubbing to exfoliate my skin, leaving me tingling in my semi-comatose state. She smothers me in a delicious Skin Radiance mask, enfolding me in a crinkly silver blanket, so the lotions can do their magic. Enveloped in warmth I am immeasurably sad when Claire finishes massaging my scalp, neck and shoulders and unwraps me, coaxing me into the shower to revive. For the finale she slathers me in moisturiser, which leaves my skin soft and glowing. I may be ready to shop again.

With the Bulgari Hotel as my residence and Knightsbridge as my playground, I feel perfectly at home. The city is laid out before me – to shop, to dine, or perchance just to relax, reveling in the Bulgari ambience. ☺



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Bulgari Hotel exterior; Il Ristorante offers tasty Italian fare; Kensington Palace Gardens; a doorman at Harrods’ department store; Royal Albert Hall; Bulgari Hotel suite.



IMAGES: Bulgari Hotel, Getty Editorial & Shutterstock.com.

