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Style and luxury for men



A man in a dark blue suit is seated at a round wooden table in a room with blue walls and a patterned rug. The room features a large wooden door, a decorative frieze above the door, and several framed architectural drawings on the wall. A tray with a glass bottle and glasses sits on the table.

AT YOUR SERVICE

By Simon Garfield

How Claridge's triumphs

Photographs by Jooney Woodward

If you wanted to be matter-of-fact about it, you'd say that Claridge's is a building with restaurants and bars and rooms in the middle of London. There are lots of places like that. But step inside and you are transported to 1812, when a hotel first opened on the site, and forward to some faraway calendar in another century where, whatever calamity may befall the universe, tea will still be served here and anything you desire from the concierge may be obtained without fuss.

Martin Ballard (head concierge): "On my first Christmas as a page boy in 1980, I was asked to go to room 527 and bring down the presents that the guests had bought for their grandchildren. So I went up, and it's a Monopoly set and all this business. So I take the presents downstairs and the guest asked me to put them in the car. One of the managers said to me: 'Do you know who that is?' They were so scared because it was the Duke of Bedford, and they were nervous how I would address him. Obviously, when I became a concierge I dealt with him a lot more.

"The funny thing was, years later he came to the hotel with his second wife one day, probably the late Eighties, and I'd been a concierge for seven or eight years. They checked in, and they loved the whole rigmarole: 'Hello Your Grace, lovely to see you, welcome back.' The band would strike up, and it was all really important, and they loved it. This receptionist, from Stoke – we had a huge group of people come from Stoke, like we have Lithuanians now, at that time it was Stoke – he looked at me and said, 'What's her name?' and I said, 'Bedford'. And he goes up and says, 'Hello, Mrs Bedford!' She went 'Aaaargh...' And I said, 'I'm terribly sorry, Your Grace, he's from Stoke.' And she said, 'Well, send him back to Stoke.'"

We all need love and attention, and some of us feel that the more we pay, the more love and attention we deserve. In a quiet week the rooms start at about £500 a night, and rocket into the thousands very fast. There are 197 rooms and suites in the hotel and, on a random Thursday in October, the Deluxe King Room, 50sq m, with luxury robes and slippers, Bose Bluetooth speaker etc, is £660, while the Mayfair Suite, 80sq m, with an entrance hall and original fireplace in the sitting room, starts at £1,380. The Terrace Suite, also nice, 85sq m, high above the London rooftops, with private butler, Burberry trench coat and Nespresso machine at your disposal, starts at £2,640. Other, signature, suites are also available for considerably more than that, please call for details.

Boris Messmer (director of rooms): "If you're just in the lobby for half an hour you will absolutely feel the difference. It has a magic to it and often we don't know what it is. Sometimes it may be that it's not too perfect, not all shiny. We carry a lot from the past but don't live with it, we don't say every day we are proud that Winston Churchill was here, we know that we have to take it further. We have one of the highest retention rates of guests of any hotel in Europe. And a lot of staff stay here for a long time."

Michael Lynch (head butler): "To mark my 40th year here we had a Champagne and canapé party, just fabulous, and then lots of speeches. I told an Irish joke:

"In the Catholic church in Ireland there's no sex before marriage. So Father Lynch is in the confession box, and young Michael comes in for confession, and he goes, 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's three weeks since my last confession. Father Lynch, I slept with a girl.' And Father Lynch was mortified. He said, 'You must give me her name.' 'No, I can't give you her name.' Father Lynch said, 'Was it Bridget Reynolds, the candlemaker's daughter?' And he went, 'I can't tell you.' Father Lynch goes, 'Was it Mary Murphy, the creamery manager's daughter?' 'I can't tell you.' 'Was it Mary Lynch, the undertaker's daughter?' And he goes, 'I can't tell you.' Father Lynch is not very happy, so he says, 'Say 100 Hail Marys, 100 Our Fathers and don't do it again.' So Michael goes out of the church and he meets his friend Paddy outside. Paddy goes, 'What did you get?' And Michael says, '100 Hail Marys, 100 Our Fathers and three possibilities.'"

"Most of the heads of department were here and I got some lovely gifts. I got a beautiful iPad, a Montblanc pen, a bouquet of flowers, a pair of cufflinks and wireless Bose headphones."

Martin Ballard: "I remember one day a famous film star came in and I couldn't remember her name. I knew her face, and I was sweating, and I thought, 'Effin' hell, what's her name?' And then she said, 'Good evening, my name is Ingrid Bergman – can you call Sir Ralph for me?' I called up my mum and said, 'You remember that film where that woman was the missionary... she was in *Casablanca* as well.' So you met people like that."

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LEFT: BORIS MESSMER, DIRECTOR OF ROOMS, JOINED CLARIDGE'S IN 2015
BELOW: JOHN WATTS, HEAD DOORMAN, JOINED IN 2000





ALICIA GÓMEZ OVALLE, CHEF DE BRIGADE, JOINED IN 2014

Boris Messmer: “I don’t live in the hotel, nobody lives in the hotel, everybody lives somewhere else. I arrive at 8am and I do at least 11 hours a day, often 12 or 13. People say, ‘But Boris, you work so much!’ and I say, ‘It’s not a coal mine.’”

“Yesterday, a fashion group here needed a lot of attention. There was a guest who arrived who was very special, and we didn’t expect that this guest would be so demanding – touching suitcases only with gloves, this kind of level; you have to ask about the mindset – are they coming from a long-haul flight? Are they just very tired, and they need eight hours of rest and the world will be different afterwards? Often the case.

“How would I sell myself? I like being there at the front rather than being at the back delegating; being involved if a guest has a problem. There were some guests this week who wanted to see me about something that happened in their room, actually a minor thing, and after a one-hour conversation I thought that they just wanted to have somebody to talk to.”

There is the ordinary world, and then there is Claridge’s world, and they rarely overlap. I spent a night there with my wife, and after we’d drunk our perfumed cocktails and had our Dover sole, both delicious, and once we’d admired the deco and the old-world tinkling civility, and then retired to a room with a bathroom as big as a tennis court,

and woke the next morning to find an impeccable breakfast already wheeled in on silent castors by silent waiters, we then disgorged ourselves back through the revolving doors onto Brook Street, which was crowded with digging workmen and the usual London chaos, and my wife and I looked at each other as if to say, “Those last 16 hours in that soft place – what was all that about?”

Martin Ballard: “Someone may say to me, ‘I want to go to the opera in Munich.’ So I have contacts. Or someone will say, ‘I’m staying in a hotel in Istanbul I’ve never stayed at before – do you know anyone there?’ ‘I do, yeah.’ ‘Well, can you call them and ask them to give me a nicer room?’ Things like that. Sometimes people call up from Houston and say, ‘My son and his wife have had twins, and we want a double pram – see if you can find one, and if not ask them if they’d make us one.’ So I’d ring up the factory. Depends what you’re looking for. We can all provide. It’s also about trust. And keeping your gob shut.

“I started in October 1980, and we had *Yellow Pages* for the whole country, and I used to get them behind the desk and stand on them to look taller. I had the shift from 4pm to 11.45pm. I got a list of the guests coming in that day and I had to get out the letters sent to them at the hotel. Lots of letters for everyone before emails and mobile phones. And people would phone up and leave messages, and say, ‘Tell Lord so-and-so I’m 20 minutes late,’ and so you’d quickly have →

to find so-and-so. There was a bank of three phone kiosks, and you'd have to find Lord so-and-so and take them to the phone and it would be someone from Buenos Aires."

Martyn Nail (executive chef): "You have to embrace change. If we went back 10 years for breakfast we'd have the full English, a few pastries, orange juice, tea or coffee. What is that now? It's green juice, and the quinoa and flax seed porridge, or the lobster roll. Going through old menus, everything was quite a simple combination – melon and Parma ham. Now all of those things are layered and more elaborate, and the list of ingredients is vast and there's more depth to the food, and more work involved in getting the layers of flavour. And the cocktails; it used to be just a Buck's Fizz, but now it's verbena and blackcurrants and herbs. The fruit and vegetables for the bars is a shopping list on its own."

As well as being a life insurance salesman, Peter Rosengard, a serial breakfaster at Claridge's, has been a DJ in Stockholm, a founder of the Comedy Store, manager of *Curiosity Killed the Cat*, and the man behind the educational charity *Since 9/11*. He says he's booked his table at the hotel until 12 December 2046, when he'll be 100 and a day.

Peter Rosengard: "Somebody worked it out the other day: I've had about 23,500 breakfasts here. I always say to people I'm meeting who don't know me, 'Look for a man who's had a lot of breakfasts.' My doctor said to me a few years ago, 'Peter, you don't have a bloodstream, you have a cholesterol stream.' I said, 'Is that good?' and he said, 'No.' I said, 'Do you think the fact that I had thousands of breakfasts of scrambled eggs and crispy bacon at Claridge's could be a contributory factor?' Which is why I take statins. When I give motivational speeches abroad, I take Martyn Nail's recipe for scrambled eggs."

"I'm proud to be a life insurance salesman. I see my clients here every day, Monday to Friday. I usually have a 7.30, an 8.30, a 9.30 and a 10.30. My City clients want to come at 6.30, 7.30, 8.30, but my media clients want 11.30. When they bring the lunch menu I know it's time to leave."

"In the mid-Seventies, I was attending a life insurance conference at the Royal Albert Hall, and they brought over this guy from Texas with a stetson who was a multimillionaire, and he said he gets his clients by asking them to breakfast really early and giving them coffee and doughnuts. I thought, 'Is he out of his mind? Breakfast meetings?' Then a light went on and I thought it was a brilliant idea. Before that I was calling guys in the City and they were always busy and couldn't see me, but then I thought if I invite them for a really great breakfast..."

"I told [Claridge's] to never bring the menu to the table. It's a ridiculous-sized thing. I don't want people reading the menu for 10 or 15 minutes when I only have an hour with them and a conveyor belt of breakfasts. Ninety-nine per cent of people accept my recommendation for the eggs and bacon. If they're religious they have the smoked salmon."

I remember the first time I went to Claridge's for breakfast in the Eighties. It was a really hot day and the first thing they did was find me a jacket. The dress code's more relaxed these days: "No shorts,

vests, sportswear, flip-flops, ripped jeans or baseball caps." There were two things that really opened up the hotel. The first was when Gordon Ramsay took over the main restaurant in 2001. A huge noise, a big, celebrity, Michelin chef coming in and changing the kitchen, dining room and menu, bringing new people to eat at the hotel who had previously thought it too fusty, and at the same time frazzling the old timers. Ramsay then became known for swearing at people; that wasn't the traditional Claridge's way at all. The restaurant had a very successful run, though, and it often hit the headlines with crazy bills (one group racked up £48,000), until it closed in 2013.

And the second thing was allowing the cameras in for a 2012 documentary series, making gentle celebrities of the staff, not least the demure and ever-grateful former general manager, Thomas Kochs. There were no great revelations and viewers learned as much about the loaded guests as they did about the hotel (sample quote: "It's always fabulous!"), but there were several amusing moments, including the one where Mr Kochs was deciding how best to welcome, on a swirly handwritten card to be placed in his suite, a member of U2: "Well, you can't really say, 'Dear Mr The Edge...'"

Martyn Nail: "Gordon Ramsay coming in was quite revolutionary. There was a need to make the dining room more commercial, and I think at that time it was the right thing to do, a breath of fresh air. Of course, it was quite a shock for people who were here at the time – it felt like the world was over."

Peter Rosengard: "So Gordon Ramsay turns up to run the restaurant, and I'm probably one of the few people in the world who knew nothing about him. Part of the deal was that he had to do breakfast. The first morning they bring my scrambled eggs and it's like a towering jelly. I say, 'Wait a minute, what's that?' And the waiter said, 'That's how Mr Ramsay likes it.' I said, 'Well, I don't like it like that. Where is he?' 'Actually, that's him walking there...' He looks like a dentist, he wears a dentist's smock. So I run over and I cut him off just before he goes into the kitchen, and I go, 'Are you Gordon Ramsay?' And he said, 'Yeah. Is there a problem?' I said, 'There is a problem, actually. It's the scrambled eggs... I don't want a towering jelly, I want soft, fluffy eggs that I've been having for 25 years or something.' I hadn't realised the whole room had gone silent. People were thinking, 'He's confronting Gordon Ramsay – this is going to be funny.' They were all waiting for him to explode and tell me to stuff it. And he just went, 'OK, no problem.' And five minutes later I had my scrambled eggs as normal."

A hotel like Claridge's doesn't get to be a hotel like Claridge's without a certain amount of mythical stories, all of which may be true. For example, the site on which it stands was once home to another hotel called Mivart's, a place where the Prince Regent, soon to be George IV, established a permanent suite for his mistresses. What else? The hallways and staircases are purposely wide enough for women wearing voluminous crinolines to walk two abreast; in the Forties, many exiled royal families made Claridge's their home, including the queen of the Netherlands and the kings of Greece, Norway and Yugoslavia.

A decade later, Hollywood royalty moved in, not least Audrey →



FROM LEFT: HOLLY SAUNDERS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF EVENTS AND GROUPS, JOINED IN 2016;
MICHAEL LYNCH, HEAD BUTLER, JOINED IN 1977; JOHN ALVES, KEEPER OF THE LIFT, JOINED IN 2009
OPPOSITE: KIMBERLY LIN, HEAD PASTRY CHEF, JOINED IN 2015, AND MARTYN NAIL, EXECUTIVE CHEF, JOINED IN 1986

Hepburn, Cary Grant and Yul Brynner. Katharine Hepburn was ticked off for wearing trousers in the lobby, so chose to use the staff entrance. Spencer Tracy apparently said that when he died he didn't want to go to heaven, he wanted to go Claridge's.

Martin Ballard: "Everyone smoked in those days and there was a cigarette machine next to the pay office. Someone would come down and say to this major character who was just standing and smoking outside the silver department all day, 'I need 12 candelabras!' So he would just be puffing away while he got those."

Martyn Nail: "When I joined the kitchen in the Eighties all the orders were still barked out in French. And back then the back-of-house guys were all Bangladeshi, but things move with the times. We've just spent the last few months putting together *Claridge's: The Cookbook*. There's a little phrase in there about our burger: 'It's not the most on-trend burger in town, but it's probably the most cared for.' The brioche bun is a certain sort of flour that comes from our supplier, the meat itself is our minced sirloin made in-house, then there's the relish that we make, and our in-house mayonnaise and our hand-cut chips and so on. Eight people within the hotel are involved in making something as simple as your burger. Normally you'd expect it to be one person, or half, if you know what I mean."

A story is also told about a part of Claridge's officially becoming another country for the day. At the end of WWII in 1945, suite 212 was ceded to Yugoslavia to allow Peter II's heir, Crown Prince Alexander, to be born on official soil. A pile of Yugoslavian earth was placed under the bed.

Boris Messmer: "I began my career at the best hotel in Hamburg and it was a hard learning curve. You were working with strong characters who had been there for 40 years, chefs who were throwing plates at you if you didn't run fast enough, carrying silver trays which weren't allowed to touch your belly. I folded napkins in the laundry, I was

a waiter, I did in-room dining, I worked at reception. I didn't always like the tone, how you were treated, how people looked down on you: 'Oh, he's just the apprentice.' It left such a mark that now, where I'm overseeing a whole division, I will always dislike colleagues speaking disrespectfully to each other. How can you create a great guest experience if you have a fear of going to the back office because your boss is sitting there and will tell you off?"

Deputy director of events and groups Holly Saunders says she knew she wanted to join the army when a colonel came to talk at her school when she was 14, but that same year her dad turned 40 and they celebrated at the chef's table at Claridge's when Ramsay was there. She says she remembers almost every mouthful, not least the wine she was allowed to try. She also revealed that sometimes the hotel planned a wedding for more than two years, and they would even bring in choreographers to help the newlyweds practise their first dance together.

Holly Saunders: "I've only been here eight months and I'm probably a bit different to the norm. When I was 19, I went to Sandhurst, and my first posting was Germany for three years, working with the Royal Artillery. Then I went to Afghanistan. After seven years, I felt that I'd got as far as I could before the army life becomes your only life and you commit everything to it. In the army you're in this huge security bubble, so I wanted to enter the real world and have more stability. I had always been thrust into doing the army events – the summer balls, the VIP dinners. I loved that, so going into hospitality was a natural fit for me.

"There are things here like the army: lots of well-oiled moving parts, a department and procedure for everything and you can't go wrong if you follow it. My training has made me calm in tricky situations, and what I like now is that when I'm faced with some very challenging guests, I can put things into perspective.

"I would never have described myself as a patient person until →



MARTIN BALLARD,
HEAD CONCIERGE,
JOINED IN 1985



I worked here. But when you work very hard and very long hours to make something perfect for somebody, and there's no understanding and recognition...

"I'm not very good at switching off and saying, 'OK, you did your best for that person, that's passed now, let's look at the next client.' I find it very hard to understand that someone couldn't acknowledge the work that's gone into something. It is acknowledged by a lot of our guests, but sometimes it isn't, and I struggle with that a bit.

"With some of the weddings, I've noticed how nervous people can be – the bride and groom, their parents, who can be clearly successful in their fields, but they're still worried. But that's why I, and my team, will do everything for them.

"You do get very absorbed in the world here. That's something my mum noticed: I went home, and we had some Champagne and then we had some prosecco, and I was like, 'Oh...' and she went, 'What do you mean, "Oh..."?' I was sorry – as if I was that person who couldn't possibly have prosecco but only Champagne."

Peter Rosengard: "When I first came here, if you had been on staff for 20 years you were still considered a new boy. Early on, the head waiter said to me, 'I have some very good news for you – you have inherited Mr Onassis's table.' He said he used to scribble his shipping deals on the tablecloths. 'Every month we would send him his account for the food and wine and dinners, and the bill for 10 to

20 tablecloths.' One day, I glanced up from my phone to find Henry Kissinger lowering himself onto my banquette. 'Dr Kissinger, what a wonderful surprise,' I said. He paused halfway down, lowered his glasses, looked at me and said, 'Wrong table.' He was meeting Douglas Hurd, the foreign secretary, in the opposite corner."

Boris Messmer: "The future? You definitely should feel a difference if you come here in two years' time, because we're always progressing. When The Savoy opened for the first time it was a big thing that two rooms shared one bathroom, because in other luxury hotels five bedrooms shared one bathroom. And that was the first hotel with electricity.

"So you'll notice improvements in technology. There definitely won't be LEDs in the front hall instead of the chandelier, but we must go with the times. So now we're looking into the cabling, so that you can have your own personal Wi-Fi for each room, and if you come in with your iPad you can put your Netflix straight on to your TV. Maybe the guest key will be on your mobile phone, so that you'll only need to hold your phone next to the door and you can open it with your fingerprint.

"Obviously, I would say this because I'm so fond of it here, but compared with other hotels I've worked in, Claridge's is beyond. The beautiful wallpaper in the room isn't reason enough to make you come back – the story is all about the staff." **ENDS**