

Hotels With History

I love hotels. Not the modern, nearly-naked minimalist places that are trendy these days, but the grand old establishments found at the heart of the world's great cities.

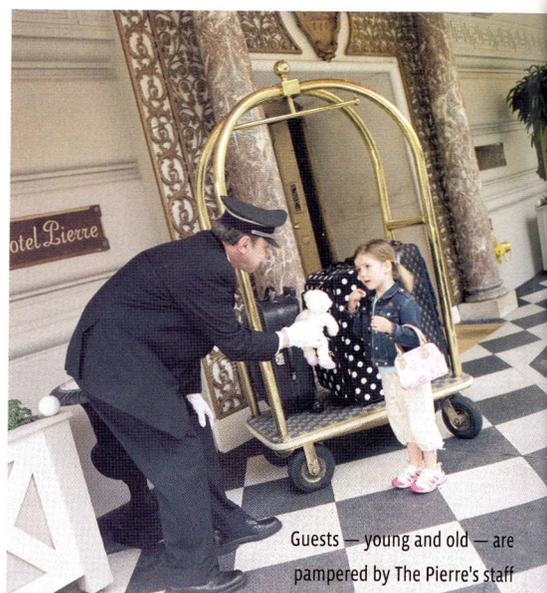
Low-rise resorts are fine at the beach. Alpine lodges are perfect in the mountains, and country inns are just right in — well — the country. But in a metropolis, give me doormen. Give me a busy lobby and the buzz of meeting and greeting. Give me a glitzy arcade full of glamorous shops.

I want to feel the pulse of the place I'm visiting and I want to know its past — and there's no better way than to stay in its best historic hotel. Here are three of my favorites.

The Biltmore, Los Angeles

This hotel has been an elegant landmark since it opened its doors in 1923. The elaborate painted ceiling in the lobby was done by artist Giovanni Battista Smeraldi, who worked lying on his back on a scaffold, *à la* Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel. The beauty of the lobby flows into the Crystal Ballroom, site of many of the early Academy Awards ceremonies. Photos from these occasions — including six-year-old Shirley Temple receiving a miniature Oscar — are included in the hotel's gallery.

I especially love the Rendezvous Lounge, where the vaulted ceiling, potted palms, and bubbling fountain create a peaceful Old



Guests — young and old — are pampered by The Pierre's staff

World atmosphere. Nearby, Smeraldi's Restaurant is popular with local business people and film crews working in the area. About 200 movies have been shot at The Biltmore, including *Wedding Crashers*, *Dream Girls*, and *Spider-Man*.

During your stay, be sure to visit the Health Club — if only to be awed by the opulent 1926 indoor swimming pool. It's surrounded by an Italian tile floor and walls, columns topped by mermaids and mythical figures, and a brass railing reminiscent of 1920s-era cruise ships.

The Millennium Biltmore is located in the heart of downtown L.A. and within walking distance of the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Music Center.

The Pierre, New York

It's hard to say what I love most about this hotel, but certainly great service, traditional furnishings, and the location on Central Park are at the top of my list.

The Pierre's fortune's have risen



and fallen over the years. On February 2, 1929, *The New York Times* announced that a 41-story apartment hotel with “a club atmosphere” and Georgian-style architecture would rise at Fifth Avenue and 61st Street. When it opened in 1930, none other than 85-year-old Auguste Escoffier served as guest chef. The Pierre quickly became the toast of New York.

The Great Depression caused the hotel to be sold at auction, and it subsequently has had various owners and management companies. In 1959, 75 apartments were sold to private residents, including Elizabeth Taylor, Mohamed al-Fayed (then the owner of Harrods), and the designer Yves Saint Laurent. Over the years, The Pierre has welcomed guests ranging from Britain’s Prince Phillip to the Rolling Stones.

Since 2005, the hotel has been managed by Taj Hotels, Resorts, and Palaces. The India-based group oversaw a \$100 million

renovation and restored the grand dame to her former glory — complete with white-gloved elevator attendants.

On a recent trip, my favorite day started with an elegant breakfast served in our suite, followed by a long walk through Central Park to the delightful Conservatory Garden. At the end of our trek, we were welcomed “home” by The Pierre’s congenial doormen.

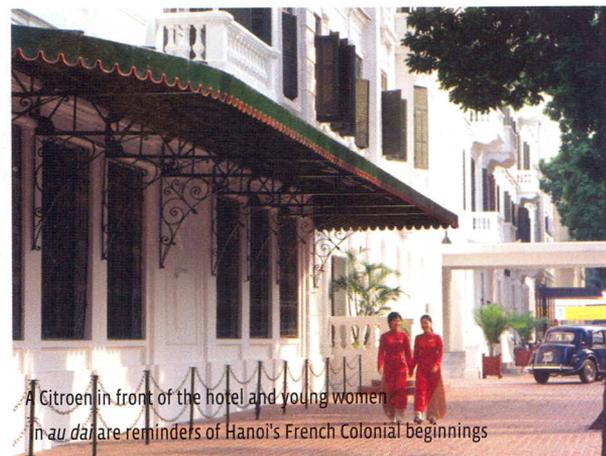
The Metropole, Hanoi, Vietnam

When it opened in 1901, the Grand Hôtel Métropole Palace became an oasis of luxury for travelers in Southeast Asia — and it still is. Other Hanoi hotels offer similar amenities, but only The Metropole has the patina of a colonial landmark and the caché of a world-class hotel.

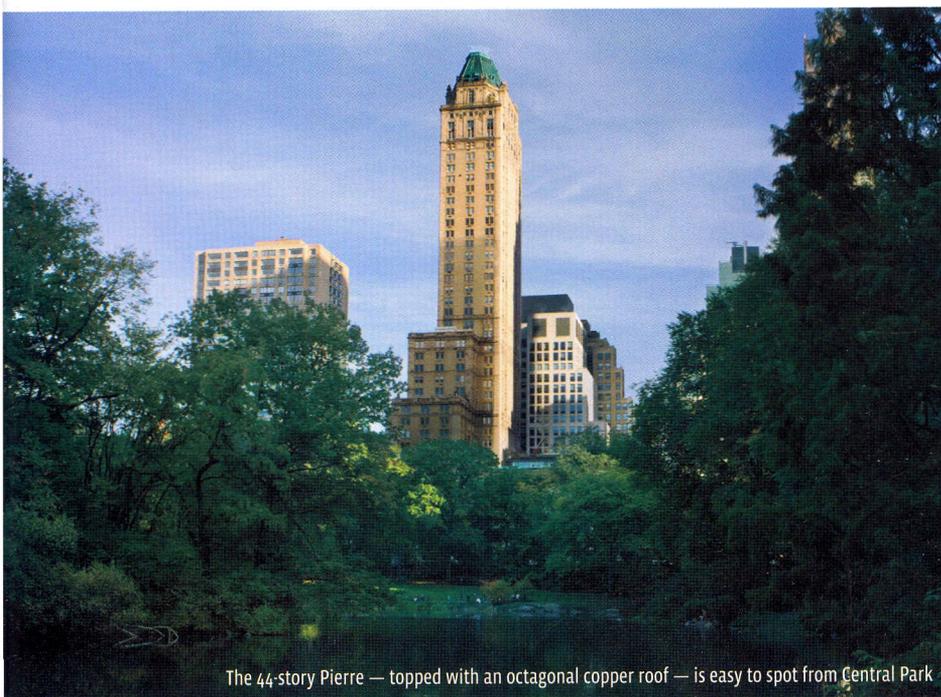
Somerset Maugham, Sir Noel Coward, and Charlie Chaplin were guests during the 1920s and ’30s, as was Graham Greene, whose 1955 book *The Quiet American* was conceived at the hotel.



The luxurious Metropole has always been an oasis for travelers in Southeast Asia



A Citroën in front of the hotel and young women in *áo dài* are reminders of Hanoi’s French Colonial beginnings



The 44-story Pierre — topped with an octagonal copper roof — is easy to spot from Central Park

In 1991, the hotel was closed for “a face lift” and soon became Vietnam’s first five-star property. The Opera Wing was added in 1996. Rooms here are the most spacious, but guests who want the full flavor of Indochine opt for the Metropole Wing. I especially enjoy the hotel’s public spaces, which are tastefully replete with Asian antiques, mahogany woodwork, and large flower arrangements.

In July 2011, *Travel + Leisure* named the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hotel one of the top three city hotels in Asia and placed it at number 38 on its list of the top 100 world’s best hotels.

ELIZABETH HANSEN