

The Ritz Paris Is Back

By SHIVANI VORA JUNE 2, 2016 NEW YORK TIMES



“When I dream of afterlife in heaven,” [Ernest Hemingway](#) once wrote in a letter to his friend and fellow writer A.E. Hotchner, “the action always takes place in the [Paris](#) Ritz.”

It’s been awhile, but the Ritz is back in action.

After a renovation that kept its doors shut for nearly four years, the [Ritz Paris](#) is reopening June 6, a few days and 118 years after its original June 1, 1898, opening and almost three months later than intended because of a fire at the property in January.

Historic hotels and stories of their renovations don’t always make for original ink, but the Ritz Paris, on the Place Vendôme in the city’s First Arrondissement, is more storied than most.

When the Swiss hotelier César Ritz bought the property, then the Hôtel de Lazun but originally a private palace constructed in the early 18th century that was home to several noble families, he did so with visions of opening the most luxurious hotel in the world. It should have, he is said to have declared, “all the refinement that a prince could desire in his own home.”

And indeed, with every guest room equipped with its own bathroom, an unheard-of amenity then, the Ritz seemed to instantly attract high society. What prominent names were regulars? Maybe the better question to ask is, which ones were not? The cadre of famous names with an affinity for the Ritz throughout its existence included [Marcel Proust](#), Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and [Coco Chanel](#), who lived there for 34 years, from 1937 to 1971.

But even the best hotels wear with age.

Mohamed al-Fayed, the Egyptian businessman and the current owner, bought the property from the Ritz family in 1979. In 2012, he decided to shutter it for the first time, to conduct a makeover that would bring it back to its former glory. “Closing down the hotel was not an easy decision to make, but it was necessary to maintain the pre-eminent position of the Ritz Paris,” he said in an email to The New York Times.

Christian Boyens, the hotel’s general manager, was more specific. “The hotel had a good run for 114 years nonstop, but you can’t deny that technology has changed so much,” he said in an interview at the Ritz Paris offices, on Rue St.-Honoré near the property. “We needed to upgrade everything from the water pressure to our air-conditioning system.”

Much of the task for this upgrade fell to Thierry W. Despont, the New York-based French architect and designer, who, in an interview in his TriBeCa offices, said that he had sensed a tiredness about the Ritz in the time he had spent there on visits to Paris. “It needed a redo, but maintaining its essence and strong identity was essential, and my vision was to keep the Ritz exactly as it was but better,” he said.



Aesthetically, the hotel still has the traditional 18th-century French décor that its guests are familiar with, but the difference now, according to both Mr. Boyens and Mr. Despont, is that there is a lighter, fresher feel throughout.

The red carpet entrance looks virtually identical to its pre-renovation days but is now wider and has windows across the top that make the lobby feel airier. The reception area, once a room with 10-foot-high ceilings and a mezzanine level above it, has been transformed into a light-flooded space with 18-foot-high ceilings because Mr. Despont got rid of the mezzanine and opened the room’s sealed high oval window so that it overlooks the Place Vendôme.

“Many of the changes are subtle,” he said. “We don’t want to say ‘Look at what we did.’”

Photo



The overall details of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Suite. Credit Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

His approach may be understated, but there is plenty that is brand new including the plumbing, heating and cooling systems, high-speed Wi-Fi and telephones from which guests can control lights and temperature.

Also, there are now 142 rooms instead of 159, the old number, and 71 are suites (because of the fire, only 90 rooms are currently available to book). The furniture in all the rooms including two of the most prized before the renovation — the Imperial Suite and the Coco Chanel Suite — is a mix of restored pieces, newly acquired antiques and replicas. There are also new themed suites, each unique, such as those named after Mozart, Maria Callas and Proust, who is finally getting his due at the hotel he adored so much that on his death bed, the story goes, [he wanted cold beer](#) that had to come from the Ritz (the hotel supposedly always kept one on ice for him).

In addition to the Proust suite, Mr. Despont has designed the Salon Proust, a space with French oak walls where guests can partake in afternoon tea. Other additions to the property include a tunnel under the Place Vendôme linking the hotel with its parking garage to give guests the option to enter in privacy; the world's first Chanel spa, Chanel au Ritz Paris, a seven-treatment-room area that is part of the two-story health club; an underground ballroom that can accommodate 400 guests; a third kitchen in the cooking school, École Ritz Escoffier; a shopping passage linking the Ritz's two buildings; and retractable roofs for the two existing

restaurants, the brasserie-style Bar Vendôme and the gastronomic French restaurant L'Espadon, to make their terraces usable all year.

And then there is Mr. Despont's garden.

“The hotel had this private open space in the heart of Paris that was like an uncut diamond,” he said.

Advertisement

[Continue reading the main story](#)

His vision of a Versailles-style small park came to life with the help of the French landscape architect Jean Mus. The 21,500-square-foot cream- and green-hued oasis is lined with more than two dozen linden trees and is replete with hanging ivy and beds of white roses, when they're in season.

The garden may be a surprise, but what looks almost the same is the Bar Hemingway, the author's favorite watering hole that was named after him in 1994. His bronze bust is intact, and the new green carpet resembles the old one, but the space is now awash with freshly sourced Hemingway memorabilia like his fishing rods and original passport photos.

Photo



The bathroom of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Suite. Credit Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

And still in place is Colin Field, Bar Hemingway's head barman who is a celebrity in his own right, in part, because of his inventive cocktails.

For several months, he has kept busy devising cocktails that will be introduced with the hotel's opening. "One is a Bloody Mary where customers are presented different kinds of in-season tomatoes and choose their favorite, which I will use to make the juice for the drink," he said.

Mr. al-Fayed is funding the project, and though the exact dollar amount is not public, Matthieu Goffard, a hotel spokesman, said that it is more than the rumored figure of 200 million euros (\$224 million).

Like the lives of the eclectic personalities associated with the Ritz, the reopening does not come without drama. The electricity-related fire on Jan. 19 on the roof of the Rue Cambon building delayed the opening from March to June and has rendered the 50 rooms inside unusable for another year or so while the roof is repaired.

As of late May, many but not all of the 90 available rooms were booked for opening day and almost sold out for the city's haute couture fashion week in early July. (Room rates from €1,000, or \$1,118.)

"The new Ritz Paris remains the same as the old Ritz Paris but in a better version," Mr. al-Fayed said.

And so the Ritz Paris, anew but in many ways the same, lives on.