

SAUNTER

# So far, yet so near

Get a taste of India while sauntering around New York City

As soon as I settle down with my cocktail at Perrine, the signature restaurant of The Pierre in New York, the maitre d' hands me the menu. *Pav bhaji*, it reads. *Yellow tadka dal* and Malabar shrimp curry too. I have a dinner reservation at the French restaurant; am I in the wrong place? As it turns out, no. The Pierre is a Taj Hotel since 2005 and ensures that Indian guests are not disappointed. I do end up eating off the main menu, but am strangely touched by the gesture of the specially curated menu. Locals are catching up at the bar over after-work drinks around me, while diners seated at the tables look longingly at the al fresco Rosé Terrace.

Opened in 1930, The Pierre today manages to combine Western décor and design with traditional Indian hospitality and service. My room has views of New York's Upper East Side, which has concrete skyscrapers and old churches in equal measure. And the iconic Central Park is right at the doorstep, a fact I have to keep repeating to myself, for, in New York, as in many other cities of the world, location is everything.

### Central Park delights

Autumn is a good time to be in NYC, though the other seasons sparkle with colour, too. Central Park, for instance, is ablaze with the colours of magnolia, tulips and cherry blossoms in summer. Buskers are out in full force, and I sit by the Bethesda statue, watching a ballet dancer pirouette gracefully, while a trio of violinists belt out a catchy rhythm. Sprawled over 700 acres in the heart of Manhattan, these grounds are the green lungs of the city, complete with a lake, a zoo and horse carriage tours. Central Park is also surrounded by other important addresses,



such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim, shopping delights from Barney's to Kate Spade, and even, ahem, Trump Tower for the curious.

I could have spent my entire New York vacation just in the vicinity of Central Park, but come late evening and Times Square beckons with its twinkling lights and flashing billboards. It is but a mere mile from The Pierre, and I amble along Fifth Avenue, peeking into designer boutiques and stopping for coffee at a popular chain inside the aforementioned Trump Tower (ok, call me curious).

Times Square gets a bad rap among frequent travellers, those who have seen it all and are enormously bored by it all. It is called touristy, crowded, uncool. Well, I think it is all of those, but it is also alive in a way that few other public spaces in the world can hope to be. Men in Spiderman costumes and posters for the latest musicals in the neighbouring theatre district take up my attention, as I find a quiet corner. Even in the middle of the noise and crowds, that is possible, and that is what makes Times Square my preferred place for people watching.

### Pop culture indulgence

Back at the hotel, Melissa Braverman, who looks after marketing at the hotel takes me to the Cotillion Ballroom where Al Pacino danced his brilliant blind tango in *Scent of a Woman*. Celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor and Yves Saint Laurent have owned apartments at the hotel, while Audrey Hepburn stayed there while filming *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. To be fair, these nuggets of trivia are not shared openly by hotel employees, but are part of luxury legend in the city anyway. And then there is the Rotunda room that leads to Perrine restaurant from inside the hotel, all sweeping marble stairs and brass lighting fixtures, with Renaissance style murals created by American artist Edward Melcarth in 1967 as the centre of attraction. The murals feature among other divine beings and cherubs floating amidst wispy clouds, Venus and Minerva (and, strangely, celebrity favourites such as Jacqueline Kennedy, too).

We end at what Braverman knows is the absolute highlight of the hotel, the Tata Presidential Suite on the 39th floor. From the large windows, I can see Central Park stretched out like a brown-green carpet below me, neatly bordered by the brown-greys of the city itself, as if to reinforce the notion that New York itself is an urban jungle. In this suite overlooking the city traffic but completely shielded from all the noise and frenzy, there are a few more distinctly Indian touches such as the large *madhubani* paintings on the walls.

In this Instagram era, where minimalism is all the rage, I feel quite at home in the unapologetic grandeur of The Pierre, that does indeed remind me of home back in India.

Throwback In this Instagram era, where minimalism is all the rage, The Pierre is unapologetically luxurious

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