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# LIVING LEGEND

Raffles Singapore ushers in a new era of luxury without diluting the ethos that catapulted it to global renown.

BY STEPHEN OSTROWSKI

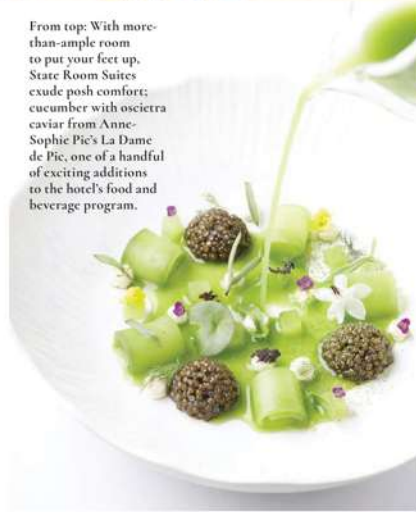
The visually arresting, winding verandas at Raffles Singapore are a conduit to exploring the property, rewarding at each sensory-stimulating turn.







From top: With more-than-ample room to put your feet up, State Room Suites exude posh comfort; cucumber with oscietra caviar from Anne-Sophie Pic's La Dame de Pic, one of a handful of exciting additions to the hotel's food and beverage program.



The line that distinguishes a space from being well-known to famous to iconic is a delicate one. Is it an instantly recognizable design or its A-list patrons? A detourworthy tittle or the stories that surround it?

It's an impossibly high bar, but for Raffles Singapore, it's one that's continually cleared over a 132-year history as grand as the palatial structure that houses it. There's the stately British Colonial architecture immortalized by a postcard-perfect facade that's as seemingly well-known as the cocktail born there, the Singapore Sling (best enjoyed at Long Bar, a purported favorite of Ernest Hemingway). Equally notable is its dizzying list of visitors, a gobsmackingly robust Rolodex of dignitaries (Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton), showbiz royalty (Elizabeth Taylor, David Bowie) and actual royalty (HRH Queen Elizabeth II), to name a few. More recently, discerning moviegoers might have recognized its cameo as a fictitious hotel in Singapore-set megahit *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Adding to that rich legacy is a tall order, doubly so when that space is so tied to its site: Opened in 1887, the hotel, monickered for Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore, is a national monument (and, technically, predates the republic of Singapore). But, it was masterfully realized when the affectionately nicknamed "Grande Dame" finally reopened its doors in August 2019 on the heels of a multiyear renovation. As General Manager Christian Westbeld explains from the hotel's soaring Grand Lobby: "Everything has been touched. Everything has been changed. It was the most elaborate restoration we could have done."

The three-phase update left no corner untouched—from overhauling its posh suites (now tallying 115, up from 103, and adding a trio of new room options) to adding haute retailers like Rimowa to its public-facing retail mecca, Raffles Arcade, to introducing a Raffles Spa ("a true Singaporean city spa," Westbeld enthuses) to a complete refurbishment of its regal exterior (think: laboriously handstripping paint). To realize the ambitious restoration, the hotel tapped Champalimaud

(lead designer), Aedas Singapore (lead architect) and Studio Lapis (heritage consultant), the triumvirate that would oversee the process demanding hyperfastidious attention to detail. Interior design changes, for example, required approval by Singapore's National Heritage Board. "This is a national monument. Singaporeans are extremely proud of this building," observes Jon Kastl, partner at Champalimaud. "They didn't want their heritage and the legacy ignored. So it was really that fine line of how to make it feel relevant not only for today's traveler, but also for tomorrow's."

Aesthetic updates have gone hand in hand with culinary ones as well. "We always have the ambition to be at the forefront when it comes to food and beverage, and having innovative up-to-date concepts to offer guests because our footprint is unique," says Westbeld of what's now a 10-concept food and bev portfolio. In the Grand Lobby, a favorite spot for the well-heeled to sip afternoon tea, Northern Indian concept Tiffin Room and mixology stalwart Writers Bar—a

titular salute to the hotel's legacy of welcoming famous scribes such as W. Somerset Maugham and Pablo Neruda—are joined by newcomer La Dame de Pic, where Anne-Sophie Pic, in her first Asia resto, plates sublime French fare in a stunning expanse of spade motifs and cozy pinks (her signature *berlingots*, sublime pasta "parcels" ensconcing a French fondue cheese core, are a must-order). Elsewhere, Chinese cuisine at yi by Jereme Leung gives foodies added reason to hit Raffles Arcade, while institution Bar & Billiard Room (on-site since 1896) assumes a new life as a Mediterranean shared-plates spot, BBR by Alain Ducasse. Of course, some things haven't changed: The time-honored tradition of tossing peanut shells on the floor of Long Bar is still intact—even if its fabled Sling has been updated with a less sweet, syrupy flavor profile.

Likewise, elements of the guest experience have been thoughtfully recalibrated too. Return visitors might notice the absence of the check-in desk at the front of the Grand Lobby, with the hotel's storied team of butlers now overseeing that process in-room. What's more, with in-room iPads, requests like room service, itinerary recommendations, and spa and restaurant bookings are at fingers' reach (ditto for controlling lighting, surfing TV and other accommodations). It's all part of an effort to modernize the guest experience, without sacrificing its storied, organic feel. Says Westbeld: "Technology plays a role in it, but it never exceeds or surpasses the human touch that our butler team is introducing."

The cumulative effect? A sense of being pulled into a magnetic, near-mythic orbit, buoyed by a diverse culinary program, meticulous service and a gilded visitor list (I notice a new face each time I pass the hotel's Hall of Fame). The inimitable thrill of the hotel isn't only having experienced its history; rather, by simply being there, it's helping to write its next chapter. *Rooms from \$950 per night, rafflesingapore.com* •