

## LUXURIOUS ALLSORTS



## In search of LOST TIME

### Nick Foulkes

I have just returned from the **Safari Club International** big game hunting convention in Las Vegas. It was the first time I had been back to Las Vegas in 17 years or so and, with that intensity so often described as Proustian, the sight of the queue at check-in brought it all flooding back to me.

I am not sure that the author of *A la Recherche* would have particularly cared for the **Mandalay Bay Hotel**: the noise, the people, and the fact that everything was a good 20 minutes' walk from everything else. For instance, if I got to the convention and found that I had left something in my room, I would put on my best Lawrence Oates manner and be gone for the better part of an hour.

But it is the queuing for hotel check-in that gets me; the first time that I had this experience was in Las Vegas, and seeing it again made me realise how accustomed I am to living in Europe where, on the whole, things are on a more manageable scale.

Looking at it logically, there is no reason why I should mind queuing for my room key. After all, it is what we in England are supposed to be good at, and given that I find myself at the airport at least twice a week, where I will queue at least four times (check-in, security, boarding and passport control on arrival) per journey, you would have thought I would have got used to it.

But there is a sentimental barrier about queuing in the hospitality industry. First of all, I do not think that the two words 'hospitality' and 'industry' are well matched. This is not to say that industrialists cannot be hospitable; but the sense of industrialising something as personal as hospitality is somehow oxymoronic. I like the pantomime of the welcome that comes with check-in to a hotel. So what, if it is only temporarily your home? You want to feel at home, and this is something that the best hotel professionals understand.

Take Philippe Leboeuf at the **Mandarin Oriental in Paris**. Philippe is a seasoned hotelier of the old school, so even though his hotel is that *rara avis*, a hyper-modern

Parisian palace, he behaves much as I imagine César Ritz would have done, in that nothing is too much trouble. On one visit, for instance, I had forgotten some medication and emailed him frantically from the Eurostar, to find that said remedies were waiting by my bed when I arrived.

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But what impresses most is the way that he appears, as if by magic, almost as soon as I walk into the hotel. Indeed, most times he beats me to the check-in desk and accompanies me to my room - that is real hospitality - and like all good magic tricks I wondered just how it was done. Last time I was in Paris, I discovered that his office is concealed behind a wall just around the corner from the front desk, meaning that very little escapes his attention and that he can be on point in seconds.

It works the other way too: even if I am leaving the hotel early in the morning, as soon as the elevator doors open and I start to walk across the lobby, I see him strolling towards me like a good-natured opponent in a gunfight in a western. It is reassuring

that so experienced a professional from the hospitality industry is not too grand to come and say hello, goodbye and generally make guests feel like guests.

But then this is always the way in great hotels. For instance, it was like this when James McBride was running the **Carlyle**. I used to love the Carlyle: I caught the very end of the Mr Hector and Bobby Short era of this grande dame of the Upper East Side, and was so taken with it that I wrote a book about it.

James was in London for a few days recently, and I took him out to dinner at the Bulgari Hotel. James is creating a resort on the Indonesian island of **Sumba** - no, I had not heard of it either: apparently you have to fly to Singapore, then to Bali and then, after an overnight stay, it is another short flight of about an hour. But the picture that he painted of luxury on the brink of wildness (albeit with high-speed wireless internet) was intoxicating.

To describe my grasp of the exact geographical location of Sumba as vague would be to imply far too much in the way of pinpoint accuracy, but as James talked to me about his plans for polo matches on the beach, the opportunities for paddle-boarding down a river past local villages and practising yoga underneath a turquoise waterfall, I began planning not just a visit but a relocation, even though I would never dream of playing polo, would fall off a paddle-board and would far rather relax by smoking a cigar than by assuming the lotus position.

He is also building another resort nearby that will be located entirely in the canopies of trees. I might have climbed a tree once as a child, but I doubt it. Nevertheless the way James told it, I wanted to scamper up the local flora and snatch coconuts from the treetops while wearing a brightly coloured headcloth and polychromatic sash into which I might stick a sabre or cutlass (as I believe is a local custom)... he makes even the presence of armed locals seem like a picturesque regional foible.

On a damp winter evening I came away feeling as though I had discovered the 21st-century Mustique, and by the sounds of it, I would not have to queue to check in.