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How to spend it

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THE MANHATTAN LOBBY
NYC HOTELS WIN OVER LOUNGE LOVERS

MANHATTAN SOCIAL NETWORK

New York's hotels are reinventing themselves as destinations in their own right - with chic, artfully designed public spaces that draw both hip locals and clued-up visitors. Heidi Mitchell reports.



Main picture: the lobby at Crosby Street Hotel in SoHo. Top right: the entrance to The Mark Hotel on the Upper East Side.



Once upon a time, not so many years ago, the only “locals” lounging about a New York hotel lobby were working girls on the make and suits on expense accounts. There was nothing exclusive or in-the-know about a public space where simply anyone could come and go, with nary a stanchion nor bouncer in sight. The go-go 1980s nights – and Ian Schrager lobby nightclubs that hosted them – had long since faded in the memory; and, with the possible exception of semi-fusty stalwarts Bemelmans Bar at The Carlyle and the King Cole Bar at the St Regis, a real New Yorker wouldn’t think of stepping a Louboutin-clad toe into a hotel bar, wouldn’t dare to toast a big birthday in the restaurant attached.

But something’s happened. All over Manhattan, the former realm of out-of-towners is suddenly the natural habitat of the local fauna. New hotels, and a clutch of recently refurbished ones, are not just chic hostilities, but bona fide destinations, with VIP roof terraces, clubby bars and celebrity chefs. Former cocktail-hour blackout zones (the Garment District) and dens of late-night debauchery (West Chelsea) have welcomed shining new architectural landmarks that have almost instantly become hives of sophisticated social swarming. Even stuffy old Midtown is markedly less tie-pins and briefcases now that a shuttered Broadway club has morphed into an eminently stylish hotel and bar, attracting both the up-and-coming and the established from every industry with its hand-pressed lime juice Gimlets and fireside restaurant. Want to observe native New Yorkers indulging in a languid coffee catch-up at midday – or a Sazerac at 4pm? See you at The Mark Hotel. Or the Ace. Or The Chatwal. Or the Crosby. It’s official: in Manhattan, the hotel-as-hangout is back.

The re-emergence of these glamorous haunts comes not at the expense of the city’s ever-evolving bar and restaurant scene – you still have to know someone to get into The Banker Club at a moment’s notice – but with a handful of properties achieving status as social destinations, it is clearly a trend.

“Since our reopening [in late 2009], we’ve seen the bar and restaurant become places for Upper East Siders seeking a true neighbourhood locale,” says Spencer Wadama, general manager of The Surrey. His \$60m retreat has 190 residential-style guest quarters, all grey and silver, walnut vanities and marble baths. It also happens to house Daniel Boulud’s original Daniel restaurant (now Café Boulud, which handles room

Clockwise from right: the drawing room at the Gramercy Park Hotel. A penthouse living area at The Chatwal. Bar Pleiades at The Surrey.



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service) on its ground floor, as well as Bould's newer, Hollywood-glam Bar Pleiades. A mixologist creates perfect Manhattans served in discreet nooks lined in black velvet. The air of mystery and transience – the elevator, after all, leads not only to the roof garden's club but also those 189 rooms and suites – means regulars may run into a neighbour, yes, but there's always that possibility of a chance encounter with a stranger (and the allure of, just maybe, an anonymous night on the town).

That New York's top new hotels are positioning themselves equally as destinations for sophisticated travellers and neighbourhood locals is a by-product of innovation: hoteliers dissatisfied with a single revenue stream started thinking creatively during the recession, looking to public spaces as ways to hook foot traffic

and keep it looping back. (Money, of course, is less of an issue for a seven-figure-hotel's bar than it is for a neighbourhood watering hole, whose lifespans in this fickle city rarely outlast that of a pet goldfish and whose budget contains significantly fewer zeros than any hospitality project.) In recent years, employing big-name designers, chefs and even curators has become de rigueur at the world's chicest hotels, and in Manhattan, the bar is set especially high. At the classic Madison Avenue condominium-hotel The Mark, developer the Alexico Group imported seasoned Parisian Olivier Lordonnois as general manager to attract a new crowd that's a mix of Upper East Siders and jetsetters looking to fly under the radar. He brought in chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten to run a drop-in sort of restaurant, and also enlisted designer Jacques Grange, who reimagined the lobby and reception in bold magentas and black-and-white stripes. Guest rooms, meanwhile, have custom-made beds swathed in Quagghati linens, all contained within a muted palette. Complimentary shoe shines come courtesy of John Lobb, the revered British bootmaker. The result is like nothing else on the pearl-and-sweater, old-moneyed Upper East Side: the \$250m Mark was an



instant magnet for nearby residents (who may have trotted along from The Surrey, one block away) when it reopened in September 2009. "We measure our success by the number of people who return to our restaurant and bars," says Lordonnois. "My philosophy is that I should be present in the lobby as much as possible."

In Midtown, the idea of getting New Yorkers to use a hotel as a destination was particularly far-fetched – a fairytale fit for one of the neighbourhood's many Broadway stages – until Indian-American hoteling magnate Sant Singh Chatwal arrived on 44th Street. The Chatwal, his 83-room hotel that opened last winter, was, in an earlier life, the uprorious Lambs Club, the 1905 Stanford White-designed clubhouse for theatre and screen luminaries (John Barrymore, Fred Astaire, Douglas Fairbanks). With a fresh Empire Deco look by Thierry Despont, a mezzanine bar where ice is hand-chipped and a restaurant by Geoffrey Zakarian that's become the ad hoc canteen for fashion and publishing executives, The Chatwal boots any hotel – or bar, for that matter – near the Great White Way firmly out of the spotlight. You don't need to see the guest rooms, with their steamer-trunk closets, leather-panelled walls and fully loaded bars (handmade bagackmon and

cocktail sets included), to fall for the place. "We've taken the best of the building's history and made it modern, but retained the 1930s soul," says general manager Joel Freyberg. "The bar is masculine, but it's got a slight air of naughtiness" – the ideal atmosphere for brokering a deal, but those blood-red leather accents suggest it's equally appropriate for a tryst. Not quite an exclusive club, but far from an anodyne lounge, The Chatwal seems perennially populated by a throng that's equal parts hotel guests (chic ones, by and large) and denizens of Manhattan. There's never the danger of walking into an echo chamber or finding yourself ordering a drink before lunch, all alone. The hotel's public areas, like those of other recent Manhattan arrivals, positively hum with life. "Its authenticity has resonated with New Yorkers," says Freyberg, "because, we think, we're a throwback to a time

when this was the neighbourhood that sparkled." No lobby bar, as any Manhattanite will tell you, currently does hotel-as-social haven better than the one at the Ace. This is particularly interesting given the fact that the Ace's dormitory-chic rooms – no closets, subway-tile bathrooms, turntables on sideboards – are calibrated to appeal less to worldly professionals than to their 20-something younger siblings (or offspring). "[Ace Hotels co-founder] Alex Calderwood came to town with this Pacific Northwest attitude, that you can hang out as long as you want and not spend any money," says Robin Standefer, co-founder of design firm Roman and Williams, which created the hotel's fluid, insouciantly retro look. The lobby's worn cowhide sofas and tartan wing chairs are open to anyone, at all hours (though after 6pm they're usually occupied by bankers in Duncan Quinn suits), and there's never pressure to order up triple-fried chips or a signature Voodoo Child cocktail (though you should; they're both delicious). "The hotel doesn't feel like a money-making venture, but a cultural contribution," Standefer says. "The community creates the success of the hotel." For an out-of-towner, the Ace community offers immediate access to New York's democratic downtown

social scene: C-suiters and ad execs, yuppy nannies nattering over macchietto after the pre-school drop-off. Hollywood players doing deals. It has become so popular, doormen have to fend off wannabes on weekends, and procuring a table at either of the hotel's two restaurants, the gastropubby Breslin or the John Dory Oyster Bar, requires Mother Teresa-like patience, even on a Monday (a no-reservations policy is fairly strictly observed, as many a rebuffed VIP will tell you). And with cocktails starting at \$12, that younger sibling (or son) studying for an MBA will probably take their business elsewhere. The exclusivity is implied.

Further downtown, the Crosby Street Hotel, which opened in late 2009, has gone head-to-head with those standbys of the art and fashion worlds, 60 Thompson and The Mercer – offering perhaps the only guaranteed good time in SoHo for anyone with an artistic bent. Visitors (and guests) are filtered from the reception area directly into the Crosby Bar to the left, the tea salon to the right, or the cinema downstairs. Owner and designer Kit Kemp and her crack team of designer-makers have done more than whimsically fill the 89 guest rooms with the tongue-in-cheeky wall prints and colour-saturated textile combinations that typify Fimdale Hotels' London properties. A new Writers on Film series is bringing esteemed novelists to the private cinema to talk about the movies that influence them: Jennifer Egan will speak about *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Hours* author Michael Cunningham will introduce his favourite, McCabe & Mrs Miller. "We are vintage people," says Kemp. "We use London like a village, and we look at New York the same way." The Crosby, then, is a new sort of Soho-East town square – there are even benches



The bar at The Mark, redesigned by Jacques Grange.

that it can draw galerinas, artists and loft-dwellers way out to the far reaches of Chelsea's gallery district. Subway lines give this area a wide berth, and hailing a taxi on far 27th Street is a test of will. "There is a new community of people who work in West Chelsea – in fashion, design, tech – a whole lot of creatives," says lead architect Enrique Norten of Ten Arquitectos, the Mexican-American firm who designed the Americano.

"and they have very few options over there."

The advance buzz indicates that the Americano will become a very viable alternative. The rooftop bar and pool, twinned subterranean lounges, and blurred lines between indoors and out should help attract the growing number of those looking for a new permutation of New-York-hotel-as-night-on-the-town. And at night's end, should they be unable to find a taxi on the West Side Highway, they can always repair upstairs. ♦

LOUNGE LOVERS' LIST

Prices are for a double room with breakfast: **Ace Hotel**, 20 West 29th Street (+1212-679 2222; www.acehotel.com/newyork), from \$359. **The Chatwal**, 130 West 44th Street (+1212-764 6200; www.thechatwal.com), from \$799. **Crosby Street Hotel**, 79 Crosby Street (+1212-226 6400; www.crosbystreethotel.com), from \$607. **Gramercy Park Hotel**, 2 Livingston Avenue (+1212-920 3300; www.gramercyparkhotel.com), from \$/43. **Hôtel Americaino**, 518 West 27th Street (+1212-216-0000; www.hotel-american.com), from \$325. **The Mark Hotel**, 25 East 77th Street (+1212-764 4300; www.themarkhotel.com), from \$630. **The Surrey**, 20 East 76th Street (+1212-905 1177; www.thesurrey.com), from \$730.

in the front courtyard, one of the few welcoming spaces for downtown's last remaining smokers.

The best of the older hotels are reinventing themselves to fend off the competition, and to lure in some real New Yorkers to their bars and lounges along with their regular crowd of sleek out-of-towners. Scott Koster, GM of the Gramercy Park Hotel, has hired a creative director to revitalise the Julian Schnabel hotspot with music, fashion and literary events, in an effort to "bring together patrons passionate about art, culture and fun". The Rose Bar Sessions – a series of exclusive performances by a truly eclectic range of artists, from Guns N' Roses to Rufus Wainwright, The Black Keys to Liza Minnelli – have corralled in-the-know neighbourhood types to see their favourite bands in an intimate venue. "Hotels have become curators of the city experience," Koster observes.

And the race to revive the golden SoHo era continues, with the *Hôtel Americaino* due for a soft opening in July. Owned by Mexican boutique-hotel enterprise Grupo Habita (the group behind The Condessa and Habita in Mexico City, and Boca Chica in Acapulco), the glassy, modernist tower is gambling

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