

FINANCIAL TIMES

travel unravelled

MAY 12 2018

how to spend it *travel edition*



On a typical night at The Tower Bar, the lively and very popular restaurant and bar at the Sunset Tower Hotel in Hollywood, you might see Jennifer Lawrence buzzing around on her new hoverboard (a gift from millennial mogul Megan Ellison), Armie Hammer having dinner with his *Call Me By Your Name* co-star Timothée Chalamet, Elon Musk ordering a steak (medium) and Cabernet, or perhaps Leonardo DiCaprio, or George Clooney, or Julianne Moore, or Madonna, or basically any celebrity you've ever heard of or read about. On one recent evening – or technically, one early morning – Bill Murray came in with the musicians in his jazz band, who proceeded to unpack and play set after set into the wee hours. And you will have to take this writer's word for



it, because no photos are allowed, ever, here. (More on that in a moment.)

The biggest star present on any given evening, however, is the hotel itself – what its owner and LA's reigning perfectionist-hotelier-in-chief Jeff Klein refers to simply as "Her". And this storied landmark and epicentre of all people and things Hollywood is more in the spotlight than normal, because "She" is currently undergoing what most Hollywood leading ladies have reconciled themselves to: a cosmetic enhancement. "After all, she's almost 90 years old," says Klein. "She needs a facelift."

Having been the Sunset Tower's owner and consummate host for 14 years, Klein is now overseeing a rehabilitation that will result in even more of what has made this iconic 1929 hotel and its public spaces

This picture: the Sunset Tower Hotel in Hollywood has entertained film stars and A-listers for almost a century. Top: the sitting room of a newly refreshed suite, with its subtle pink, cream and brown accents



LA CONFIDENTIAL

A storied Sunset Boulevard landmark – and one of Hollywood's most exclusive hangouts, thanks to its famous code of discretion – is emerging from a major facelift with its classic cachet intact. Martha McCully reports

Clockwise from below: in the bedrooms warm cove lighting has replaced spotlights. A new "dark and sexy" bar is situated just off the pool terrace. Iggy Pop famously dived into the hotel pool from his apartment window



so well-attended and well-loved. Klein, who calls himself a "hotel whisperer," says he was inspired only by what his clients told him they needed. And so he has both updated and added.

The Terrace has been reborn, with a new "dark and sexy" bar (pictured above right) in the style of the existing Tower Bar (pictured overleaf), and a separate indoor/outdoor restaurant that will engage with the pool and quintessential LA vista beyond. (You can see the Pacific, and most of Los Angeles, from this spot.) The pool (pictured below), the same one that Iggy Pop insisted on diving into from his apartment window above, will be more accessible through the open doors. A seating area at the centre of the restaurant allows for elegant

A bright and airy, 7,000sq ft gym has been installed in what was formerly John Wayne's apartment (legend has it that Wayne kept a pet cow on his balcony, so that guests could enjoy fresh milk in their coffee)

and relaxed dining; the sofas are covered in what Klein describes as a "wacky but really cool" fabric he designed himself. The pink leather, semi-circular booths are clubby and chic; the outdoor patio seating gives the restaurant a Parisian flair.

Joanna Vargas, the sought-after New York aesthetician who has operated on an ad-hoc basis out of the Sunset Tower suites for years to tend to her Los Angeles

celebrity clientele, now has a dedicated spa, complete with a hammam. A bright and airy, 7,000sq ft gym has been installed in what was formerly John Wayne's apartment (legend has it Wayne kept a pet cow on his balcony, so that guests could enjoy fresh milk in their coffee). Mansion Fitness of West Hollywood will create a private training facility here, making it a place for hotel guests to tread, tone and train, if they desire. Three thousand of those square feet are outdoors – "a happy gym", says Klein, unlike the so often dark little hotel facilities that we're all too familiar with.

The guest rooms themselves have all been enriched as well. Klein has respected the original palette that interior designer Paul Fortune created for him when he first acquired and restored the art deco building in 2006, but mixed things up. The walls are repainted a custom dusty pink, with soft cream and brown accents in each room. "It's enhancement," says Klein. "This place is all about feeling better and looking better," he adds, noting that the reflection of this subtle pink is the most flattering shade for all skin tones. Even the sheer blinds in the windows are pale pink, reflecting the first shade of California sunset the evening I visited. ("Why do sheers always have to be white?" he asks half-rhetorically.) Overhead spotlights have been replaced with warm cove lighting.

There are bold new pieces throughout. Vintage-inspired lamps were reproduced from originals Klein found at a Paris flea market. There is an ottoman covered in another fabric designed by Klein, this one a botanical print; a leather bench inspired by an Hermès version can now be found in the bedrooms. Brass inlays and accents give the furniture a metallic glint; even the wardrobes gleam, with *verre églomisé* armoire doors creating a distressed mirror finish with gold leaf. The bathroom walls are papered in custom-created drawings (pictured overleaf) by the famous fashion and beauty illustrator Donald Robertson, depicting charmingly louche scenes





Clockwise from left: every bathroom features wallpaper depicting “Sunset Tower life”, by fashion illustrator Donald Robertson. A penthouse suite terrace. The now legendary Tower Bar was a storage space when the current owner bought the hotel



As much as the Sunset Tower feels refreshed and redone with its updated decor, spa, fitness room and revamped restaurant/bar, what hasn't changed is its soul

from the hotel's life, from the Sunset Boulevard sign to a Martini in The Tower Bar.

Klein has taken every last element into consideration in this nip and tuck. The touches that convey Sunset Tower's particular brand of glamour, whether they will be noticed consciously or subconsciously by most guests, are testament to Klein's obsessive eye for detail, right down to the wooden swizzle sticks embossed with

the hotel name. (These sticks in particular had once kept Klein up at night, notably the placement of the type, which was not in the exact right spot when he saw the prototype.) Klein points to the perfect embroidered linen napkins, and the hotel name on the butter dish just so; the homemade chocolate-chip cookies (served warm, they are divine); the casement window handles and the metal straws for those who don't want to drink



from a glass. “I’m creating an experience. It’s a fantasy I have in my head, like creating a ride for someone. From the second they enter their door, the valet, the way the place looks, the way the menu reads – everything creates this experience: the Sunset Tower world.”

Klein had the image firmly in his mind long before he purchased the hotel. He had looked at the elegantly old-school Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle Hotel in New York, with its dark wood panels and servers in white jackets, and thought, “Why can’t that exist in LA?” “If you put Claridge’s and The Mercer and Hollywood in a blender, you get the Sunset Tower,” he adds.

As celebrity-dense as it is, The Tower Bar – a storage space when Klein bought the hotel, and, before that, Bugsy Siegel’s private apartment until he was arrested for running an illegal gambling ring from it – is a safe haven for those who want to revel in near-guaranteed privacy. Much of that is thanks to the most famous maître d’ in Hollywood, Dimitri Dimitrov, who oversees seating, personalities and just about everything else at night. But it was Jennifer Aniston who suggested to Klein that he should simply not permit photos to be taken in the hotel. Thus the restaurant, the bar, the clientele, all have to be experienced in person, because reading about them in *OK!* magazine simply won’t ever be possible. (As Klein and I chatted over drinks one night in March, a few tables away sat an A-list chanteuse, who was once engaged to a similarly recognisable young actor. A photo had surfaced of him with another pop star at The Tower Bar. The engagement was promptly broken off, and the waiter attending to them promptly sacked.)

As much as the Sunset Tower feels refreshed and redone, with its updated decor, spa, fitness room and revamped restaurant/bar, what hasn’t changed is its soul (nor, thank goodness, the delicious crispy truffle fries and lobster tacos.) There’s an intimacy here that comes from the personalised experience and fantasy-turned-reality world that Klein and Dimitrov have created. A guest we met exiting the elevator turned to Klein as we passed and remarked, “I’m under the spell”. Klein just smiled. ♦

Sunset Tower Hotel, 8358 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, CA 90069 (+1323-654 7100; sunsettowerhotel.com); from \$485 per night.