

An AFFAIR to **REMEMBER**

As the **Ritz Paris** celebrates its 120th anniversary this year,
MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA visits the iconic hotel to trace its glorious journey.



In 1898, when Swiss hotelier César Ritz threw open the doors of the Ritz Paris at Place Vendôme, little did he know his name would become a part of English vernacular, forever. Soon after its launch, the hotel emerged as a glamorous emblem of elegance, privilege, and luxury, and in the 1920s, the word ‘ritz’—defined as expensively stylish—entered the Webster dictionary. Later, Fred Astaire’s rendition of Irving Berlin’s song ‘Puttin’ on the Ritz’ captured the collective conscience, and the phrase quickly caught on in everyday language as an idiom for being fashionably turned out.

On June 1, 2018, the Ritz Paris celebrates its 120th birthday. For more than a century, this magnificent property has played host to an exceptional clientele of royalty, heads of state, and celebrities, and, till date, retains its reputation as one of the most acclaimed, exclusive, and opulent hotels in the world.

The day I check in, Paris receives the most snow she has in 30 years. Ice crunches underfoot at the cobbled Place Vendôme as I make my way across the historic square and pass through the hotel’s heritage arches into its glittering foyer—a subtle sense of lightness fills this well-lit space. Outside, sunlight ricochets off the snow-white landscape like a thousand sparkling diamonds.

It is impossibly magical. Then again, I expect the hotel (and the view from it) is enchanting in

any season. After all, artistic legends such as F Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway, and Coco Chanel have lived, loved, created masterpieces, and entertained within these walls. It wouldn’t be beyond the realms of belief to think that a part of their bewitching allure still lingers.

Originally housed in an 18th-century townhouse, the palace is a magnificent representation of classic French architecture and is a revered landmark. In addition to its aesthetic standing, the Ritz has been a pioneer in the hospitality space. Creating luxury concepts since its inception, it was among the first hotels to feature an en-suite bathroom and electricity in every room. Always focussed on the comforts of their premium patrons, the property shut its doors for the first time in history, in 2012, for a four-year, multi-million-dollar refurbishment.

“We needed to move with the times,” says General Manager Christian Boyens at the very posh L’Espadon, the hotel’s Michelin-star restaurant. Over a lavish three-course meal, Boyens stresses the importance of integrating modern technology with the hotel’s classic historic style.



Clockwise: A delectable dessert at L’Espadon; plush, blue and gold-patterned carpets line the hotel’s lobby; the French-classical façade of the Ritz Paris. Opposite: Period pieces and pastel shades lend a royal touch to the Suite Impériale.





Clockwise: Celebrated bartender Colin Peter Field at Bar Hemingway; the living area of Suite Impériale; daylight streams in through the glass ceiling at L'Espadon, creating a bright space for an afternoon get-together.

When the Ritz reopened in 2016, it did not stray from its original grandeur, instead introducing subtle changes that merged seamlessly into the luxe motif. My room, for instance, is a plush cocoon of old-world opulence and nifty, new-age tricks, with many of César Ritz' original design features still on display: an ornate gold key in a wall socket to control the lights, 23K gold-plated swan faucets in the bathroom, maid and valet pull-chains by the bath, and peach-hued towels and robes 'to flatter women's complexions'. Within the antique-style gilded walls, pastel furnishings, ornate chandeliers, and cabbage-rose displays are cleverly concealed, not one, but three television screens. My favourite is the one smartly disguised as a painting easel, white-patina wood frame and all.

As a member of The Leading Hotels of the World, the Ritz Paris is less hotel and more private residence to many of its regular guests. Perhaps the best example of this concept is Coco Chanel, who moved in to the Ritz in 1937 and stayed for 34 years, until she breathed her last in 1971. Her living quarters were customised to her taste, and, today, one of the 15 Prestige Suites at the Ritz is named in her honour. Personalised with rare, black-and-white photos, sketches, books, and a custom-made mirror by Robert Goossens, Chanel's favourite jewellery designer, the suite is a wonderful tribute to a true icon.

Other illustrious visitors of the Ritz have been feted with eponymous alcoves, as well. The book-lined Salon Proust, where afternoon tea is served within French Oak walls, is an almost meditative space. The iconic Bar Hemingway is among Paris' most storied venues. The walls are lined with vintage pictures of the Nobel

award-winning author, hunting paraphernalia, and other ephemera. But before it became Hemingway's preferred haunt, it was the Petit Bar—in its original avatar in the '20s, this was the ladies bar. Vestiges of that period remain as special care is taken to make ladies feel welcome in the warm, wooded space. My delicious Sorrento—a Prosecco cocktail—comes with a matching cabbage rose clipped to the glass.

Almost a century later, Hemingway's legacy lives on here. Perhaps this is what the author meant when he famously wrote, "When I dream of an afterlife in heaven, the action always takes place at the Ritz Paris." ■

GETTING THERE

Fly Air France directly to Paris from India. airfrance.in

CHECK IN to the Suite Impériale to experience 18th-century French aristocratic splendour. From ₹1.45 lacs; lhw.com

DINE outdoors at the Les Jardins de L'Espadon on warm summer afternoons; the atrium roof peels back to let in the sunshine.

HEAD TO the Chanel boutique nearby to check out the new silver- and gold-tone metallic handbags collection. chanel.com



COURTESY OF RITZ CARLTON (3)