

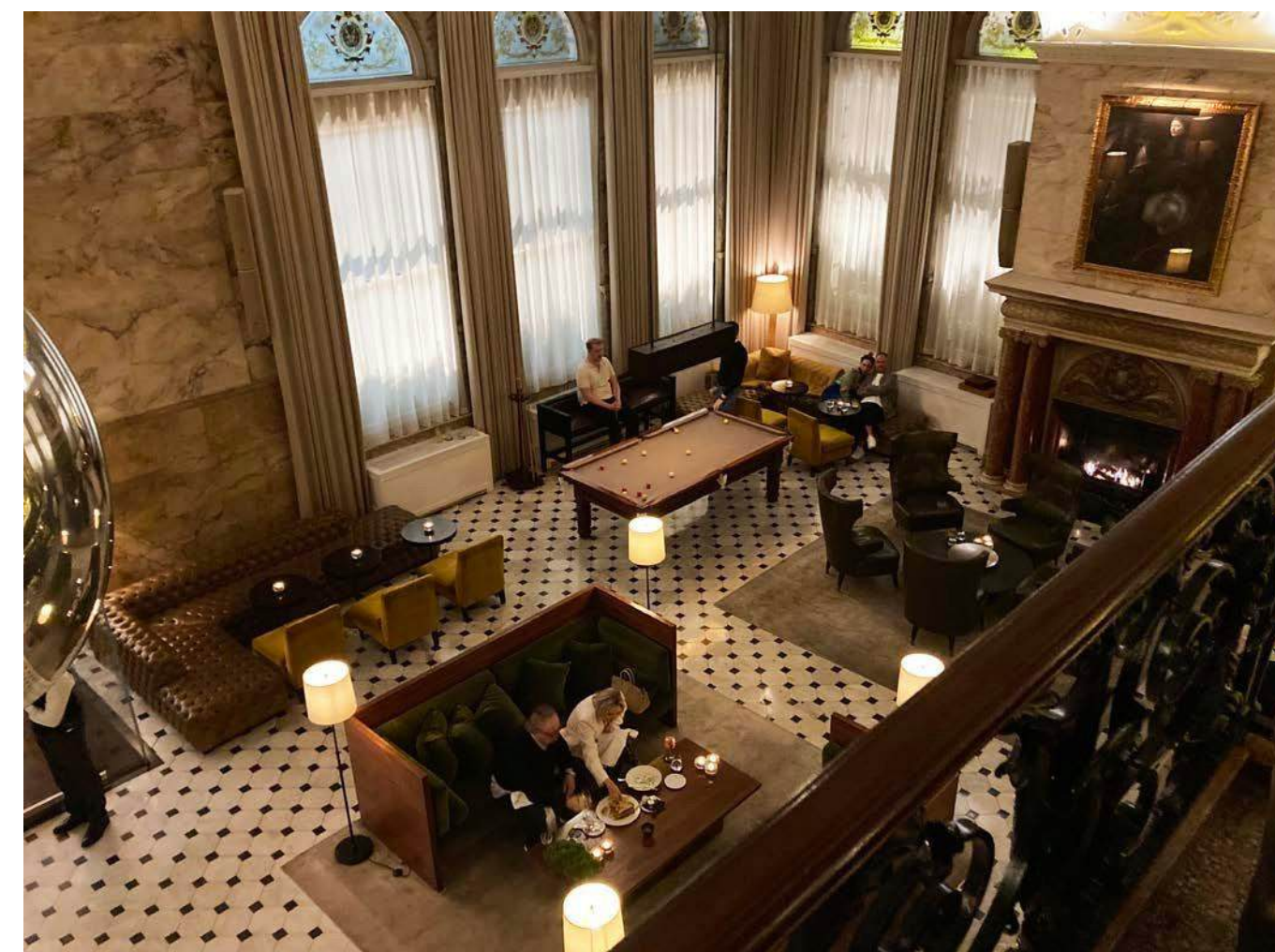


COUNTRY MICE

in the BIG SMOKE

Mark and Jo Cummings spend a couple of nights in the five-star luxury of The London Edition

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Mark Cummings



I am a big believer in doing your homework before heading off for any writing job, and I have to say this wasn't just any ordinary experience. The London Edition in the heart of the capital is celebrating its 10th birthday, and I needed to digest the philosophy of the man behind the hotel's concept, Ian Schrager. He's the man who brought the famous Studio 54 nightclub to New York, the man credited with inventing the concept of the boutique hotel and the man who inspired the ideology behind the hotel I was about to stay in for two nights.

The thing that caught my eye about Ian was the following quote: 'Schrager saw the opportunity to challenge the traditional mass-market mentality in favour of something unique, daring and original. What was accomplished was that a hotel could appeal to a sensibility no matter what age, economic status, where one lived or their occupation, and be freed from the constraints of traditional demographics.'

The reason this struck a chord with me was because (full disclosure now) I am not

left: Mark and Jo enjoy a canal boat trip to Little Venice

above: People-watching from the mezzanine at The London Edition

a five-star hotel type of guy. On holiday, I go for self-catering over hotel, and on my home turf it will be a Premier Inn on the ring road around Gloucester not the Queens Hotel in Cheltenham. My idea of happiness is being in my campervan on a campsite with decent loos and showers. I am not 100 per cent comfortable around luxury, and I was intrigued to see how I would react to such surroundings. I think part of it was the fear

'If a lobby area is designed to SET A MOOD, this one HITS THE MARK'

of not being able to just be me. Will they be my sort of people? Do I need a tie for dinner? Will my wife, Jo, have to instruct me on which cutlery to use?

With all this buzzing around my head, we had a smooth train journey from Kemble, a few stops and a change on the underground from Paddington, followed by a short walk from Tottenham Court Tube to The London Edition on Berners Street, just north of Soho.

With a sprinkle of excitement and a pinch of apprehension, we made our way through the

impressive entrance and our first chance to experience Mr Schrager's vision.

If a lobby area is designed to set a mood, this one hits the mark. You enter a huge space full of the noise of bubbling conversations with intricate carved ceilings, warm happy staff to greet you, comfy couches and even a very smart pool table. Schrager's vision was to create various chilled areas, and my favourite was the mezzanine overlooking the lobby where you could nearly touch the stucco ceilings and you could 'people watch' from a great height. From my eyrie I spied a celebrity who had appeared on *Strictly* a few years back, many hotel residents just enjoying the vibe and a coffee, many non-residents discussing business and, at the end of the evening, a group of middle-aged men playing pool to a rather decent standard. The only disadvantage of my lofty viewing platform was not quite being able to pick up what they were saying, so before my next visit I will do a course in lip reading.

The building was originally constructed in 1835 as five luxurious townhouses, which were combined to form the Berners Hotel in 1908 at the height of Edwardian era. Just off the lobby is Berner's Tavern, where gazing at the amazing chandeliers gave me neck ache. They are inspired by New York City's Grand Central Station and mix beautifully >



with a wider Parisian vibe. Just around the corner is The Punch Room with its fumed-oak panelled den, reminiscent of the library of a Cotswold manor house.

The location of The London Edition was hugely appealing because it gave us the opportunity to do our favourite thing in London... walk. I once walked to London from Gloucestershire in the footsteps of Dick Whittington to illustrate his amazing true-life story. The last day of this nine-day epic included a detour across the city to Upper Holloway and the Whittington Hospital before dropping down to The Mansion House to be greeted by the Mayor of London. Ever since that day I've loved walking the streets of London.

From the hotel it's a short saunter to the classic hotspots of Soho, Leicester Square, Buckingham Palace, Westminster and over to the South Bank. Having done all that, we came home via the Dominion Theatre and popped in to see Peter Andre and Jason Donovan in *Grease* followed by a late-night romantic nibble in Chinatown where my

wife and I first met in the summer of 1990! The next day we devoured a hearty breakfast of waffles and fresh cream, then headed north. After a half-hour stroll, we entered the electric buzz of Camden Town where we wandered around the market before taking a narrowboat canal trip to Little Venice. Our route back home to our favourite lobby took us up Primrose Hill and down through Regent's Park guided by the sight of the BT Tower and the calming tones of that lady on Google Maps. There was good news and bad news when got back – sadly those blokes had made it to the pool table first, but that gave us more time to look at the menu designed by Michelin-starred chef Jason Atherton, dribble, agonise over what to have, dribble again and try to make a decision.

All that walking had built up an appetite, so a mac 'n' cheese with some lobster did the trick for me, and a nice bit of steak refuelled Jo. I was told off for staring at the chandeliers and not engaging in witty, romantic *badinage*. After a delicious pudding, it was up to the room for a long, dreamy sleep. The

above: Berners' Tavern
below left : Breakfast waffles
middle: Jo and Mark enjoy the buzz of Camden Town
right: A sumptuous bedroom at The London Edition

wood-panelled rooms have the feeling of a cabin on a private yacht, and I can confirm we got a full eight hours.

As we left, I thought about that original Schragger quote. 'A hotel that could appeal to a sensibility no matter what age, economic status, where one lived or their occupation, and be freed from the constraints of traditional demographics.'

As a couple of West Country urchins, we felt totally relaxed because the staff were completely genuine, the layout was informal, there was no dress code and I even worked out the cutlery without any assistance. ●

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