

BAROQUE 'N' ROLLSTAR

The part of London where Handel meets Hendrix is a real gem, writes *Julia Horton*

Until recently, Mayfair and Park Lane only made me think of the colour purple and childhood Christmases, vying with my family to pile up little red plastic hotels on our Monopoly set. So to stay in a historic and luxurious establishment that boasts both iconic place names in its address feels surreal.

The Sheraton Grand London Park Lane in the heart of Mayfair is not as famous as the Ritz, but it has a rich art deco heritage and it has just been renovated.

The Queen, who lives just across Green Park in Buckingham Palace, learnt to waltz here. Today the ballroom dance floor is covered, with guests more likely to “shuffle about” than trip the light fantastic, staff admit.

Happily, though, the public's appetite for the English tradition of afternoon tea remains strong, and the hotel's art deco Palm Court is a lovely location. It offers nearly 30 blends of tea and an array of beautifully presented sandwiches, scones and colourful, dainty pastries. In the corner a harpist delicately plucks out tunes, including instrumentals of songs by Seal and Lionel Richie.

While Buckingham Palace is famous, we drop into the lesser-known West End homes of American guitarist Jimi Hendrix and the 18th-century composer George Frideric Handel instead. Although separated by centuries, the houses they once lived in are side by side in nearby Brook Street, where they now form a curious museum celebrating both artists.

“Sorry about the Hendrix noise,” our guide says as we begin our tour in the attic of Handel's former home, now filled with the sound of guitar riffs accompanying an

exhibition about the legendary rock star. Lovers of classical music are apparently less likely to enjoy the rockier side of the house, but Hendrix fans seem more open-minded and often leave with a new-found love of baroque, she adds.

Getting more animated, our guide explains that when Hendrix moved here and learnt that a musical genius had been a “neighbour”, the guitarist bought an LP of Handel's Messiah. He loved it so much he later bought a second copy.

I'm surprised to spy a Monopoly set in Hendrix's bedroom, which has been pieced together by the museum using old photographs to recreate it, including his beloved and eclectic record collection.

Back at the hotel's Mercante restaurant, head chef Davide D'Ignazio showcases his new “no menu” supper club, serving traditional hunters' food from his native Italy with a modern twist. Intriguingly, the prep includes slow-cooking octopus for a whole day, although an unusual lobster bisque “crisp” was done “in a microwave”.

The next day at Lock & Co, the world's oldest hat shop, I imagine Hendrix and Handel shopping here – though there's no record that either did.

A heritage room reveals a fascinating history, dating back to the 17th century, with customers including royalty, politicians and celebrities such as David Beckham. Some hats cost thousands of pounds, but they start nearer to £50 and I buy a lovely black cloche, in case I return to Monopoly land.

Later at the historic Burlington Arcade – England's first indoor shopping mall – I'm invited at Hancocks diamond jewellers to try on a glittering ring that resembles



two miniature Eiffel Towers. I clearly couldn't afford it even if I wanted to, but that doesn't lessen the shock when the genial owner reveals the ornament's price tag: £1.25m.

A complimentary personal scent “profiling” appointment at Penhaligon's perfumers a few doors along is fascinating. I'm asked a raft of questions about my favourite things before being presented with a perfume I love.

Dining at Park Chinois is another extravagant experience. Delicious, delicate dim sum are brought out by a whirl of waiters against a backdrop of theatrical red decor. It's worth the visit for the taps in the ladies' lavatories alone, which are fashioned to resemble dazzling golden swans.

Back at the Sheraton, manager Kieran Quinn is a welcoming host, though his occasional sidekick Ted – a fluffy little cottonpoo, or Coton de Tulear/poodle cross – steals the show.

The little hound reminds me again of Monopoly and the dog playing

The Burlington Arcade retains its old charm, while our writer Julia tries on a hat from Lock & Co, below



piece. Maybe they'll introduce complimentary Teds in each room to help folk like me bridge the Mayfair gap between fantasy and reality.

Julia Horton was a guest of the Sheraton Grand London Park Lane; rooms from about £294 pppn with breakfast, sheratonparklane.com. From October 19, the Mercante supper club will be monthly, every third Thursday, with four courses and wine for £55pp. Afternoon tea with sparkling wine at Palm Court is £45pp (palmcourtlondon.co.uk). Guided tours of Handel and Hendrix cost £15pp (handelhendrix.org). Tours of Lock & Co and Burlington Arcade are free; burlington-arcade.co.uk, lockhatters.co.uk. Penhaligon's free personal fragrance profiling takes 45-60 minutes, penhaligons.com. Dinner dishes at Park Chinois cot £14-£95 (parkchinois.com). Flights from Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Inverness, Glasgow and Prestwick airports – visit skyscanner.net for deals

INSPIRING TRAVEL Co

Pearl of the Middle East

Call our Travel Specialists on 01244 355 509
or visit www.inspiringtravelcompany.co.uk

OURS. YOURS.

Bahrain

EST 1974
ITC TRAVEL GROUP



