



Dwelling in the Past

Historic hotels offer modern hospitality and the spirit of a bygone era. BY KRISTY ALPERT

Let the warm Cusco sun slowly melt the ice in my pisco cocktail while I sat back and soaked in my surroundings at the JW Marriott El Convento Cusco's historic courtyard café. The space once belonged to a 16th-century convent where an order of Augustinian monks freely roamed and made their home within the surrounding rooms. The convent sat abandoned for centuries, decaying amid a wave of travelers passing by the ruins on their way to Machu Picchu, until 2006 when the hotel began to delicately transform the convent into a modern refuge.

Visions of Peruvian monks promenaded through my head as I glanced around at the ancient columns and historic façade, imagining what it must have been like so many centuries ago. The hotel managed to give a voice to the space by preserving so much of the original site, and with the warm sun setting its glow on the courtyard, I began to feel like I was part of the

hotel's new history.

Rather than dwelling *on* the past, the El Convento Cusco offers guests a chance to dwell *in* the past, thus joining the ranks of numerous historic properties around the world converted into hotels in recent years.

Indeed, at hotels around the globe, history is in the making. In Germany, guests will be staying in the oldest hotel in Europe when they check in to the Zum Roten Bären, where recently renovated guestrooms offer a comfortable night's sleep within this ancient building that boasts sections and walls dating to 1120. In Marrakech, visitors are able to sleep, eat and even raid the wardrobe of the riad's former resident, Josephine Baker, at the Riad Star. And in Barcelona travelers can choose between gaining inspiration while sleeping within the refurbished walls of Pablo Picasso's first studio at the trendy and modern

CONVERTED COURTYARD:

JW Marriott El Convento
Cusco courtyard café

PHOTO: © JW MARRIOTT HOTELS
& RESORTS

Serras Hotel or sleeping like a king at the luxurious Mercer Hotel Barcelona, tastefully built within a framework of medieval arches and Roman fortifications.

Historic hotels seek to offer travelers a deeper and more historical connection to their destinations, adding another layer of nostalgia in the tapestry of experiential travel. The days when travelers selected hotels based solely upon breakfast buffets and WiFi connectivity have long passed; the modern traveler is ready to swap consistency for authenticity. In fact, according to a recent survey commissioned by American Express, more than 72 percent of travelers prefer to spend money on experiences rather than things. Modern travelers seek inspiration and immersive experiences, but they are also hoping to be inspired and entrenched in their destination during all aspects of their vacations.

Uniquely suited to meet these travel wishes, historic hotels offer much more than a sense of place; they have a story to tell.

“Historic hotels tell a story of a building’s bygone era through the architecture, artifacts and photos throughout the building, and the way they incorporate certain elements of history throughout cuisine, cocktails and beyond,” explains Heather Taylor, manager of marketing communications, Historic Hotels of America.

“The story these hotels tell is interwoven throughout and displayed in fun and interesting ways to travelers,” she adds. “There is a sense of place and past that a new, cookie-cutter hotel doesn’t have. Historic hotels are not just places to stay while traveling; oftentimes they are the destination and provide an experience that can’t be achieved with new hotels. There are so many great examples of this within hotels from both Historic Hotels of America and Historic Hotels Worldwide. From the candy bar you receive at check-in at the Hotel Hershey that tells the rich history of how chocolate fueled the town and economy in that area to the domed architecture at the West Baden Springs Hotel where the atrium was once the largest free-span dome until the Houston Astrodome was constructed in the 1960s.”

Sleeping in a historic hotel can be an adventure in itself, as often it takes a bit of digging and exploring to unearth the property’s hidden histories. If only the walls could talk! Guests of the Culloden House Hotel in Inverness, Scotland, may take note of the imposing coat of arms that ushers them up a series of stone steps, through the heavy front door and into the grand foyer, but only the ones who stop to ask appreciate the story behind that simple journey.

The Culloden House’s story dates back to the 16th century, when a fortified Jacobean castle stood on the site. The castle was home to numerous owners in



IMMERSED IN HISTORY: Mercer Hotel Barcelona exterior (top) and dining area (bottom left), and dome in the West Baden Springs Hotel (bottom right)

PHOTOS: © MERCER HOTEL BARCELONA, © ERICA SCHROEDER | DREAMSTIME.COM

its early years — including the family of the first Stuart king, Robert II, and the chieftain of the Macintosh clan — but the castle’s most famous owner came in 1745 when Bonnie Prince Charlie moved in and used the castle as his battle headquarters during the Jacobite uprising. He lived in the castle until the bloody battle on Culloden Moor April 16, 1746, where more than a thousand Jacobites were killed just steps from that same stone staircase.

Culloden Moor would become the last battle of its kind to be fought on British soil and is now a symbol of Scotland’s biggest turning point in history. An estimated 20 million people of Scottish ancestry now live abroad due to the dispersion that took place after the battle. The solemn atmosphere surrounding Culloden Moor lingered long after the battle until a descendent of the castle’s original owner began restoring the property to its former prestige. Although the fortifications were removed, most of the original castle infrastructures remain intact, including the vaulted cellars of the dungeon that now houses the hotel’s sauna and massage room.

Just like most other historic hotels, guests of the Culloden House don’t have to forgo modern amenities to get a taste of history, as the 28-room hotel offers free WiFi, a gourmet restaurant and Bose music systems in each room. Most historic hotels actually offer the same or more services than the typical new-build hotel.

“Historic hotels offer a spirit of place that is often missing in modern, purpose-built hotels with their endless corridors and identikit box-shaped rooms,” says Catherine Leonard, secretary-general, International National Trusts Organisation, who notes that just because the hotel has a past doesn’t mean it doesn’t have a future. “In the face of a relentless tide of development and globalization, heritage can help us understand where we came from and what the future holds. With the growth of technology and platforms like Airbnb, the demand for quirky, non-corporate, story-rich hotel rooms will only grow.”



SUITE DREAMS: *Riad Star Ebony Suite*

PHOTO: © RIAD STAR

To be accepted into the exclusive Historic Hotels Worldwide directory, a building must

- Present use as historic accommodations
- Be 75 years or older
- Be historically relevant as a significant location with a historic district, historically significant landmark, place of a historic event, former home of a famous person or historic city center
- Celebrate its history by showcasing memorabilia, artwork, photography and other examples of its historic significance
- Be recognized by a local preservation organization or national trust

Culloden House
culloddenhouse.co.uk

Historic Hotels Worldwide
historichotelsworldwide.com

International National Trusts Organisation
into.org.org

JW Marriott El Convento Cusco
marriott.com

Mercer Hotel Barcelona
mercercbarcelona.com

Riad Star
riadstar.com

Serras Hotel
hoteltheserrasbarcelona.com

It might be easy to assume the rapid rate of ever-changing technology would drive the desire for newer, tech-driven hotels, but the opposite has actually occurred. The trend leans instead toward place identity and adaptive reuse as more and more buildings or sites are being reused for purposes other than those for which they were originally designed.

“We have many hotels that have had former lives as many things: a shoe factory, an armory, railroad station, Carmelite convent, etc.,” says Historic Hotels’ Taylor. “Adaptive reuse has gotten traction in recent years, and I think that as the network of historic hotels continues to grow, many people will continue to see the value in preserving these beautiful buildings and turning them into hotels. The experience a traveler will have at a historic hotel is one that they will remember; and once you have experienced that, it’s hard to go back to anything else.”