

Posted on 01 March 2009

Sense in the City

The Carlyle hotel's Sense spa proves that relaxation is the ultimate luxury



The dark lobby of the Sense spa.

Whether they board the shuttle from Reagan to LaGuardia, the Acela to Penn Station, or a helicopter to 34th Street, Washingtonians are always heading to Manhattan. The Carlyle hotel, embodying everything that is elegant about New York City, has long been a refuge of choice for the most discerning among them.

Now its siren song sounds even sweeter with the opening of Sense, a Rosewood Spa. A bi-level oasis on the third floor of the Art Deco hotel, the dim light, dark wood, graceful chandeliers, and of course, exemplary service, beckon those who appreciate truly classic style. One of the spa's coups was arranging to use beauty products supplied by the French manufacturer Sisley (the only other spa in the world to use the line is the Byblos in St. Tropez). Sense opened its doors in late Fall 2008, in the middle of economic turbulence and dropping temperatures. Perfecting the art of escape may be needed now more than ever – even if it's only for a mere hour or two.

The spa's elegant entrée beckons guests through a barrel-vaulted stairwell, covered entirely with platinum mosaic tiles, calling to mind the entrance to a glamorous restaurant or cocktail lounge. The mirrors and furniture are oversized and antique, as well-suited to a library as a spa, inducing guests to further escape into their day of pampering. The ceilings, dotted with weighty crystal chandeliers, project a glow that bounces off the lacquered gray walls, the charcoal faux leather floors, and chrome details – perfectly in keeping with the hotel's stylistic heritage.

The atmosphere is masculine for a spa, and it's apparent that designer **Mark Zeff** has taken chances at every turn. Sense is the first such facility with black walls, an odd choice, but one executed seamlessly when paired with soft lighting and organic forms. The charcoal and chrome touches reflect the refined character of the Upper East Side and the Carlyle's ageless glamour.

What stands out about the spa – and essentially the Carlyle – is the fusion of modern treatments and traditional comfort. Sense is not just another Zen getaway. There is no bamboo or gravel walkway, and no Enya or nature soundtrack to desensitize urban ears. Its relatively small size – five treatment rooms, a relaxation room, special Duet suite, his-and-her-changing rooms, petite fitness studio, and a small hair salon run by Manhattan favorite **Yves Durif** – make it unlikely that you will have to spend pre-treatment moments elbow-to-elbow in a locker room. The Carlyle has taken the modern-day spa and redefined it to match the taste and lifestyle of the discerning Upper East Sider for a day.

The Carlyle: Pied-à-Terre for the Powerful



John F. Kennedy leaves his headquarters at the Carlyle Hotel en route to St. Patrick's Cathedral to attend Low Mass. (Photo: Bettmann/CORBIS)

Situated on a quiet block of 76th Street, between Madison and Park avenues, the historic Carlyle hotel has been a private oasis for high-profile Washingtonians for nearly eight decades. Known as “The New York White House” during the Kennedy administration, the 35th president owned a duplex tower apartment in the 180-room hotel for 10 years and made full use of its underground tunnels to spirit in Marilyn Monroe on several occasions. Park Avenue-bred Jacqueline Kennedy met designer Oleg Cassini there to discuss sketches of his designs for her inaugural ball gown. After her husband’s assassination, Mrs. Kennedy lived in a suite with Caroline and John Jr. and made the hotel her pied-à-terre while her Fifth Avenue apartment was being renovated.

The Carlyle’s reputation for absolute privacy and discretion was also relied upon by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who continued the “New York White House” tradition. More recently, such visiting heads of state as Nicholas Sarkozy and Tony Blair have stayed there as well.

Realizing that the hotel could provide a comforting oasis in both good times and bad, Marie-Dennett McDill, a vivacious Washington socialite and daughter of H. Gabriel Murphy, part-owner of the Washington Senators baseball team, recently chose to spend her final days amid the elegant atmosphere she so loved throughout her life. Even at the end, McDill’s joie de vivre impressed the Carlyle staff, who catered to her every wish as she spent her final 10 weeks in a back booth in Bemelmans, the iconic piano bar where she tapped her toes to Cole Porter standards.

For Mrs. McDill’s family, the Carlyle provided comfort, and for many celebrities it provides a cocoon of comfort and an essential privacy shield from ever-lurking paparazzi. Princess Diana chose the Carlyle on her visits to Manhattan, often entering through the garage elevator. Legend has it that after the Beatles disbanded, two of the famed foursome stayed at the hotel at the exact same time and remained completely unaware that the other was simultaneously staying at the same historic hotel.

The list of Washingtonians who call the Carlyle home when they are in New York is long and distinguished, but it was the Kennedys who forever cemented the bond between the hotel and the capital.