

## London's Best Digs?

England, 2011 June 9th

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Within waving distance of the Queen's London pad, the Taj hotel, 51 Buckingham Gate, is champion.



Famous grand hotels in London aren't hidden away are they? The Savoy. The Connaught. Claridges. Brown's. The Dorchester. Ask any London cabbie to take you to anyone of these hotels and the driver could probably get you there blindfolded.

Much as I like the grand entrances and olde worlde atmosphere of those hotels, the Taj Group's 51 Buckingham Gate is my pick from this top bunch of de luxe lodgings.

51 Buckingham Gate is a bit hidden away, sort of. Looking out one of the windows of my suite I can see Buckingham Palace and St James' Park. If I lean out the window I can see Big Ben's clockface and Parliament's Gothic towers. Hidden? Hardly. Discreetly tucked away? Yes indeed.

Probably why a number of Hollywood and Bollywood stars prefer to stay here. It's a paparazzi free zone. An acquaintance told me that a certain Australian red-headed Oscar winning actress stayed here recently for a month en famille. She wanted some privacy with her two children, which she got evidently.

All I wanted was a quiet hotel in which to lay my tired head after travelling non-stop for six weeks. I wanted good food, service and a good location too.

Doesn't everyone?

"51 Buckingham Gate is the first London hotel I've stayed in where the service was absolutely flawless." What I want and what I get however don't always coincide. Good location often means next to a major thoroughway, noisy and crowded with rumbling traffic. Quiet often means so far from the centre of the action that the hotel could simultaneously operate as a retirement home. Service is the constant inconsistency. Rarely do I encounter reliably well-trained staff members that have all read from the same training manuals.

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A few examples: I asked the concierge to help me arrange a flight from Dubrovnik to Athens. Within fifteen minutes I had slipped under my door in an embossed envelope a complete listing of all available transport options including prices for hiring a car to drive myself, train timetables, bus timetables and ferry timetables, followed by a phone call to enquire if I needed anything else. Not happy with the options immediately available, he suggested politely that I allow him to do further research which may take a couple more hours. Would I mind? Not in the least. I was gobsmacked that he was so quick and that he cared so much.

By the way, I also learned that flying from Dubrovnik to Athens was ridiculously overpriced, that Dubrovnik has no railway station, that the bus to Athens went via Belgrade and took nearly two days to get there and that I couldn't hire a car in Croatia and leave it in Greece without paying an added hefty surcharge.

This became a challenge so perplexing that the concierge, a lovely man from Brazil, worked on my problem during a Sunday, his day off, to come up with a plausible solution, which he did.

The breakfast room maitre d'hotel, a Turk from Istanbul made me feel so comfortable that my first breakfast lasted three hours. Reading the Guardian, the Times and Independent newspapers in a state of complete relaxation is a treat I don't often enjoy even at home.

The head housekeeper, a marvellous Italian lady of impeccable discretion fixed a problem about a leak from the hallway ceiling in my suite (someone had overfilled a bath in the floor above mine) with such professionalism and alacrity that I forgot about it. The carpet in my hallway was completely dry when I returned after lunch. How she managed to get it cleaned and dry within a few hours continues to surprise me.

The hotel's Michelin starred restaurant, Quilon, serves the best Indian food I've ate outside India with a better wine list, more comfortable seating with more room between tables and with better background music. And the service was better too.

The hotel's general manager, the exquisite Ms. Araceli Rius-Perez, a Spaniard who clearly loves her hotel, made me feel so welcomed, appreciated and valued that I hugged her when leaving. I don't normally hug hotel managers. They don't normally hug me either. Nuff said.

The employees at 51 Buckingham Gate represent something of a microcosm of current London society, a hodgepodge of nationalities from around the globe. What they all have in common here is a sense of shared purpose. The goal is to make the guest feel at home, esteemed, as if he or she is the single most important person met that whole day.

This kind of service is endangered in my experience. In so many hotels I visit these days, I'm merely a number. Eye contact between employee and guest is often avoided. Personal interaction is limited to hello and goodbye.

It helps too that 51 Buckingham Gate's overall impression is marked by the quality of the accommodation itself. The suites are all extravagantly large. Mine was larger than the two-bedroom flat I once occupied near Brixton.

The colours in the suites are somewhat muted, something I don't really mind. Hotels ruled by overwrought design features and glaring colours tend to err on the side of discomfort, when the wow factor tires after a day. There were no sharp ends anywhere in my suite, something else that bothers me about furniture that may look edgy while posing as lethal weapons. None of that here.

Though beige was the dominant colour, a liberal spread of vases full of fresh flowers added pizzazz. All up however, everything worked, the plumbing was perfect in a land of generally imperfect water pressure, huge shower, separate spa tub, plush towels, good toiletries (Moulton-Brown) and the bed was as good as I've slept in anywhere else at this 5-star level.

Summing up, I could actually live at 51 Buckingham Gate.

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51 Buckingham Gate

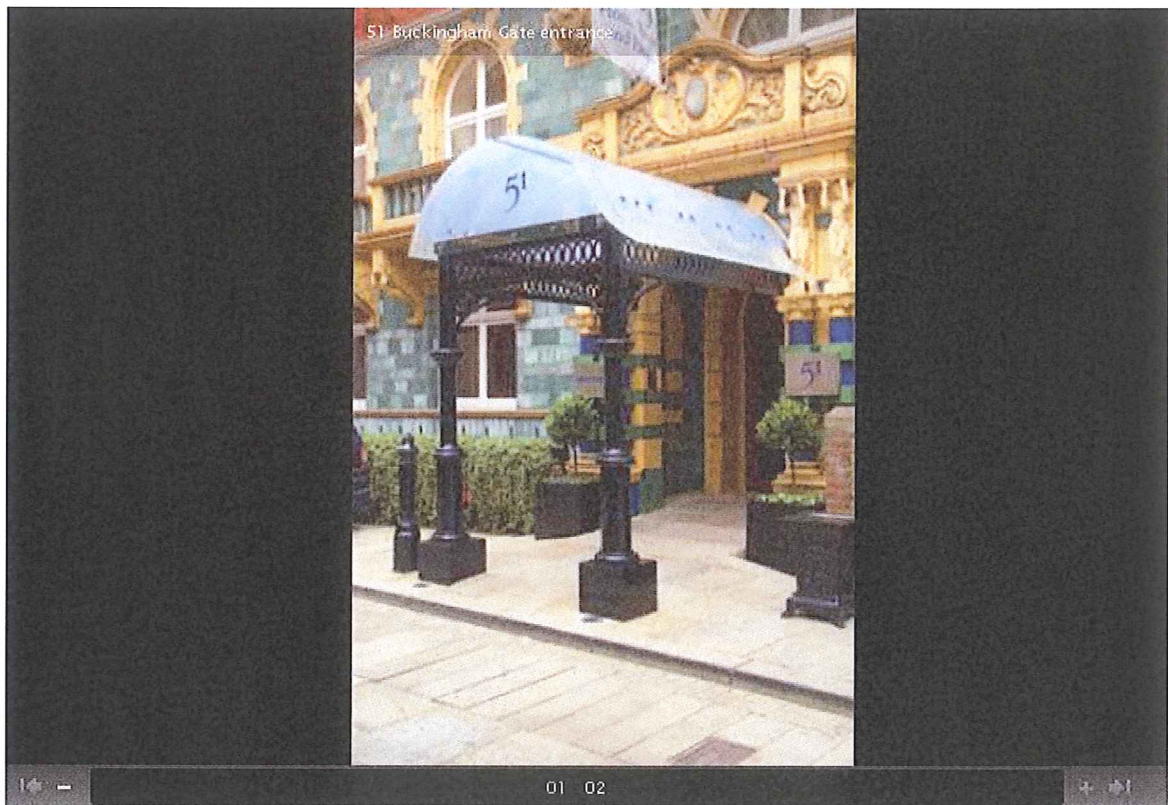
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Quilon restaurant is shortly due to undergo renovation. Check first upon booking for updates. Alternatively, if Quilon room service offers meals from Quilon's menu.

Nearest tube station: St. James. Nearby shopping options are endless. Ask the concierge for advice.



@ Story by **Tom Neal Tacker**

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