

# Storied Plaza hotel rises again

It's still one of New York's most famous landmarks

MARIE-JOELLE PARENT  
Sun Media

NEW YORK — A telling of the history of New York would be incomplete without the Plaza Hotel. It was here that the Beatles spent their first night in the U.S., that Marilyn Monroe famously bared her breast in front of photographers, where Truman Capote held his famous Black and White Ball and where Woody

Allen publicly declared his love for Soon Yi. Closed for three years of intensive renovations, the Plaza has begun the newest stage in its already storied life.

There was widespread consternation in the Big Apple back in 2005 when the El-Ad group, owners of the Plaza, announced they were converting half of the hotel into condominiums. The number of hotel rooms was cut from

805 to 282 and more than 150 apartments were built, including one that sold for \$50 million.

"In the minds of New Yorkers, the Plaza belongs to them, but it was more fear than actual harm," said Francis Morrone, Plaza devotee and architecture historian who is my guide for the day. "It was a good thing. The hotel wouldn't have survived; tourists today are looking for the boutique hotel experience."

Morrone is enthralled by the completely renovated rooms.

The Grand Ballroom, the Terrace Room, the Oak Room and the Edwardian Room have all recovered their former grandeur, not to mention the famous Palm Court with its luminous glass dome, hidden for more than 60 years by a false ceiling.

## Movies filmed there

Images of *Home Alone* spring to mind upon entering the impressive lobby. The Plaza was the set for many movies over the years. The first was Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, filmed in the Oak Bar in 1959. Fifty years later, *Gossip Girl* and Robert Pattinson are doing the same, another sign the Plaza is far from being out of style.

The Plaza is the kind of hotel where your family portrait is placed in your room, and your initials are embroidered on your pillowcases. All that glitters in these rooms really is gold, 24-carat gold to be exact. It's also the kind of hotel where every suite has its own butler. Oh, and there's a Rolls Royce Phantom available for guests who want an outing anywhere from five to eight blocks away.

With the renovations complete, the Plaza reopened its doors last year, just as the recession took hold. According to general manager Shane



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The Plaza remains one of New York City's most storied hotels and has been the scene of many happenings, including Marilyn Monroe's wardrobe malfunction.

Krige, the Plaza is 85%-95% booked on weekends. A miracle, given that rooms go for an average of between \$500 and \$3,500 a night.

The three-year closure was the first in the hotel's 98-year history and an eternity in the hospitality industry. The work cost \$400 million US. Everything was redone, from the plumbing to the electrical system.

"The timing was perfect because with the economic crisis, we're going to enter into a period of austerity in architecture and no one is going to want to start work like this," Morrone noted.

The Plaza decor has also evolved with less Louis XV style in evidence and more modern spaces. The Rose Club, next to the lobby, is a champagne bar that any *Sex and the City* fan would die for.

The hotel's most exclusive



suite, The Royal Plaza, can be yours for \$20,000 a night. Its 4,400 square feet of space includes three bedrooms, a library and the latest in sound systems. Mariah Carey was the suite's first guest, and used it to film her latest music video.

Built in 1907 to unseat the St. Regis Hotel, the Plaza cost \$12.5 million, by far the most expensive building of its time. The arrival of the French Renaissance style marked the beginning of Fifth Avenue's transformation into a major commercial artery. Today, the Plaza is an integral part of the New York landscape and has come a long way from its earliest days, when a mere \$2.50 would get you a room.

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## FUN FACTS About the Plaza

- Frank Lloyd Wright, the world-famous architect, was a fan of the Plaza. He spent the last years of his life here.
- The hotel hosts an average of 100 weddings a year. Many celebrities got married in the ballroom.
- Eddie Murphy wasn't a fan of the Plaza carpets and insisted they be covered with white rugs for his wedding.
- The hotel's first guest on Oct. 1, 1907, was Alfred Gwinn Vanderbilt, a member of America's richest family at the time. He lived there for his last eight years.
- During a press conference in 1956, the Plaza was witness to the first-ever wardrobe malfunction when Marilyn Monroe's dress strap broke.
- There was a time when the Plaza was the best-known building to American children thanks to Eloise, the heroine from the books by author Kay Thompson. One of the rooms was even remodelled for visitors to look like the one from the series.
- The Plaza and the Waldorf-Astoria are the only New York hotels classified as historic landmarks.