

Be it a cheap B&B or a cultural stalwart of hospitality, what is it about the idea of a hotel that conjures up strong notions of glamour and mystique? Bre Graham muses on her passions for the lewd luxury of hotels.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS



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What do you think about when you think of a hotel room? A pillow menu at a Premier Inn, the lukewarm buffet breakfast of the Heathrow Hilton pre-dawn flight, the fancy loos we all sneak into inside the bellboy-guarded lobbies of Park Lane’s finest? Or, is it their place in pop culture as a space for celebrity excesses, illicit affairs, dirty weekend romances and sad, lonely deaths?

I was first drawn to hotels at 15 when I realised the staff at the harbour-side Marriott in Sydney were too polite to ask for my ID when I ordered a Martini. I’d sit in the hotel lobby and people-watch, trying to spot people up to no good. Ideally celebrities. For me, hotels were places of activity or drama. They were where Joni Mitchell penned her love songs, where Michael Jackson rode around on a motorised buggy on a floor all to himself, or where Courtney Love spent days shagging Steve Coogan, famously not realising until much later that he was Alan Partridge.

It’s easy to get lost in the charm of a hotel and their link to the lewd, romantic mysteries of celebrity culture. I’m not ashamed to admit that I collect celebrity hotel anecdotes like I pocket free toiletries. When I slip into the thick white sheets of a good hotel, I can imagine Marilyn Monroe lounging nude in Egyptian cotton in her bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel, where she lived at various points throughout her life. When I sit at the dimly-lit desk in the hotel room of a big city and do my make-up in the mirror I think of Coco Chanel living for 30 years in The Ritz in Paris, slowly applying her lipstick before ascending the staircase for dinner. Upon visiting New York’s Waldorf Astoria, I pictured Elizabeth Taylor prowling its hallways in high-waisted jeans, or Cole Porter living there for the last 15 years of his life. I was also overjoyed to recently discover I visited the Moscow Ritz-Carlton the same year Donald

Trump was enjoying his famous “golden showers.”

Each hotel has a signature smell regardless of whether they cost £50 or £500 per night. Cheap motels can smell like sweat and sex, still stained into the sheets. Fancy ones like The Langham tend to pump in their own fragrance, blended exclusively for their hotels to give guests a consistent experience. Some hotels just take on the scent of the city outside. But it doesn’t matter what they smell like, look like, who you are or why you’re there: hotels give you something more than the space inside the room for the time you rent it.

When you walk down the quintessentially long hotel hallways, past each identical room, you pass by a different scene being set behind every door. In rows of identical spaces, behind one door a woman could be renting a room by the hour to write her book away from her family, and one room over a couple could be blossoming their sexual fantasies with just a wall in between. Hotel rooms are so unfurnished by your own life, they contain no signs of who you are and no trace of your history. All you need to bring is yourself and an idea of who you want to be when you’re there. By default, hotel rooms are the places where actors, musicians and writers tend to live their real lives when working, not just a handful of days on holiday like others.

In terms of goings-on, behind closed doors, nothing quite beats the mysteries and marvels of The Hotel Chelsea. Think of Leonard Cohen and Janis Joplin meeting in the elevator before he brought her back to room 222 and immortalised the moment by penning the famous lyrics “You were talking so brave and so sweet / Giving me head on the unmade bed while the limousines wait in the street.” You can just imagine them staying up late and smoking cigarettes till dawn or taking a long bath together amongst the little shampoo and

soap bottles that back then were stamped with *THE CHELSEA HOTEL: A REST STOP FOR RARE INDIVIDUALS*. In room 211, Bob Dylan wrote all of the songs for *Blonde* while living alone in the hotel in 1966, scribbling lyrics that would linger in people's minds for decades to come. Madonna used the same hotel to shoot photographs for her book *Sex* in 1992. And, until the early 2000s, a dentist operated out of room 614, a hairdresser out of 303 and a *Vogue* editor lived on the eighth floor. When asked about his time at the Chelsea, Leonard Cohen said that there's something special about a place where "at 4am, you can bring along a midget, a bear and four ladies, take them to your room and no one cares about it at all."

In 1969 John Lennon and Yoko Ono spent their honeymoon—like many lovers—curled up together in a hotel bed, but they did so in the name of peace and love during their 'Bed In' in the Amsterdam Hilton. Meanwhile, in LA, Dennis Hopper was cracking on with some alleged orgies with 50 women at a time in Chateau Marmont. Elsewhere, in the late 1960s when Joan Didion was driving around California writing *The White Album* she'd spend most nights alone in motels. In those essays, she turns blank rooms into evocative moments that capture what it feels like to be a woman sleeping alone in a building full of other people. You can see her finishing a story in a cigarette haze and listening to the couple fucking next door. With her now ubiquitous packing list for these trips taped up in her wardrobe she knew that in these places being anonymous was powerful. "Notice the deliberate anonymity of costume: in a skirt, a leotard and stockings, I could pass on either side of the culture. Notice the mohair throw for the trunk line flights (i.e. no blankets) and for the motel room in which the air conditioning could not be turned off. Notice the Bourbon for the same motel room." It's so easy to imagine Joan later in the 1970s with her typewriter hauled up in Chateau Marmont with her husband John whirling out screenplays and drinking

Diet Coke. Fly quickly across the globe to London a few decades later and look through the windows of the Ritz and you can see Margaret Thatcher ordering a grapefruit via room service to her recuperation suite where she lived for a few months and eventually died.

Maya Angelou once said, "I have kept a hotel room in every town I've ever lived in. I rent a hotel room for a few months, I insist that all things are taken off the walls. I don't want anything in there. I go into the room and I feel as if all my beliefs are suspended. Nothing holds me to anything." There is a sense in hotels that whatever your whim, whether it's removing the art from the walls or Prince's request to have everything in his

Dorchester suite painted black or Barbra Streisand's desire for peach-coloured toilet seats that matched her complexion, hotels are spaces that come complete with service.

As the success of Airbnb continues to skyrocket and the eye-watering rates of traditional hotels like Claridge's keep most people away, this type of hotel culture becomes even more mythical and mysterious. I can't remember the last time I read of a rockstar throwing a television out of Chateau Marmont's windows or racking up an actually un-payable bill. As for the Chelsea, well, the last time I walked past, it was a sad shell of itself. It's reopening this year and I'm doubtful its new owners will be able to rival its surreal legacy.

The real charm of any hotel is just knowing that it is there. It's comforting to know that if you ever needed an escape from reality you could walk into a hotel and request a room with a bed and bath and pretend that any of your problems are another world away. Hotel rooms are so unadorned with anything that you're attached to and so absent of photographs or sentiment that your mind is left to wander freely away from who you are. You only bring to hotels the parts of yourself that you choose. It encompasses the entire ethos of 'a room of one's own': it's a room that is entirely yours and you're alone so long as you're wrapped up in those lush white sheets and your 'Do Not Disturb' sign is firmly hanging on the door. ♦



Janis Joplin outside of the Hotel Chelsea, New York.





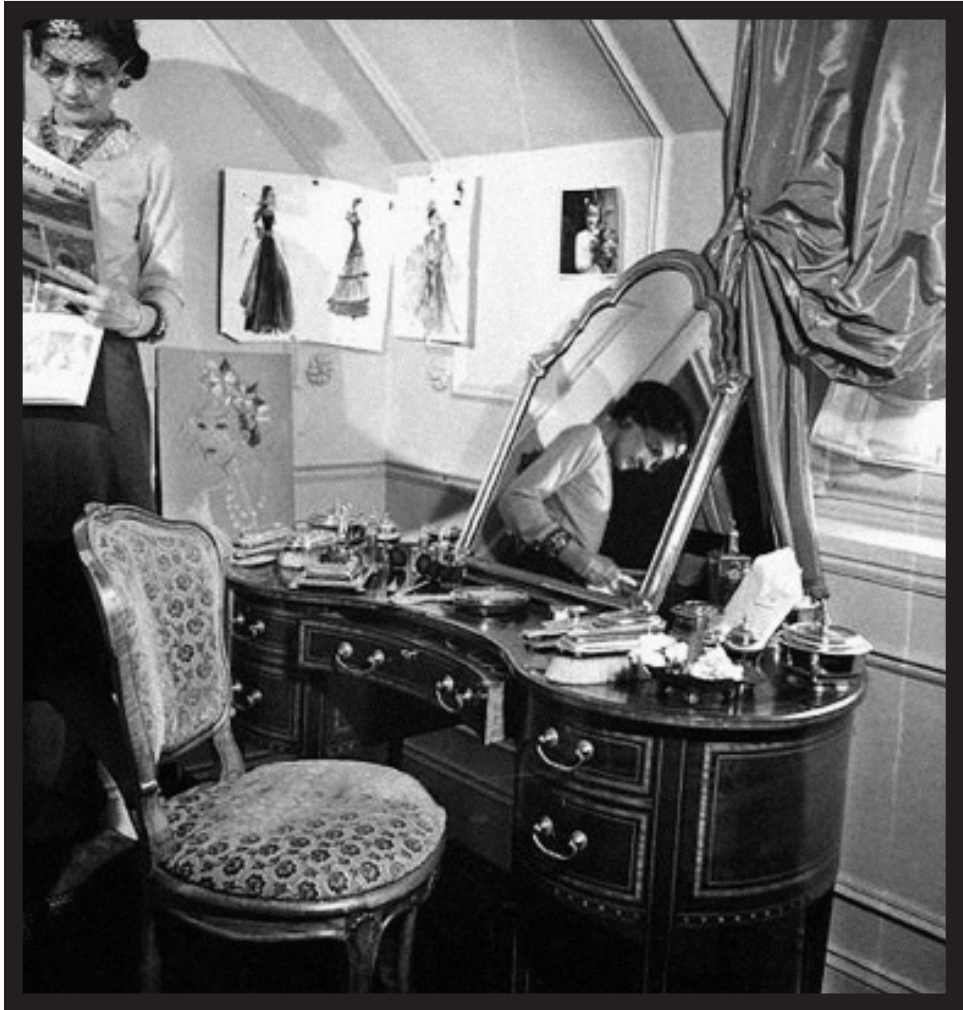
Coco Chanel at The Ritz in 1937



John Lennon and Yoko Ono in the Amsterdam Hilton, 1969







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