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Entrance to the St. Regis Hotel looking east on 55th St.

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The St. Regis Hotel: best in show in New York

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NEW YORK CITY — Anna, one of three reception desk clerks at the St. Regis Hotel, in Manhattan, sees the threesome heading her way — businessmen, obviously — and her face lights up.

"It's been a long time, Mr. Mitchell," she says, smiling. "Good to have you back." Mr. Mitchell, a regular visitor who recommended the St. Regis to his colleagues, smiles in return, gratified — and flattered — to be a member of the elite St. Regis guest list.

And so will you be, when you check into this historic Manhattan institution with the fabulous Fifth Avenue and 55th Street address. Whether you're a first-timer in the Big Apple or a businessman on your 10th trip, the time you spend inside the hotel will be one of the highlights of your stay.

Prompt service, and not just at the reception desk, is the byword here. You can't carry your own luggage through the front entrance, even if your bag is small and on wheels. Bearing it inward is the sacred duty of one of several doormen, dressed in midnight blue with gold braid.

If you've arrived early and your room isn't quite ready, a staff member is waiting to escort you to the Astor Court restaurant for a cup of tea or coffee. Or you can recuperate from your flight and drive from the airport in the St. Regis Spa's steam room, included in every guest's room rates.

After you've checked in, your "personal e-butler butler" will knock to ask if you'd like your jacket or dress pressed, or another pot of tea. The butler, the St. Regis' newest guest service — also included in the room rate — carries a pager and responds almost instantly to a text message or a phone call placed from inside or outside the hotel. Want a hot bath drawn at bedtime? Just ask.

The historic St. Regis, a Beaux Arts landmark, was built in 1904 by John Jacob Astor, who adorned it with latest in the new century's amenities: telephones in each room, central heating, air cooling and a fire alarm system. New York's tallest hotel, it was designed to provide sumptuous luxury for Astor's friends and colleagues, the kind of world traveler who would appreciate genuine Louis XV furniture, oriental rugs, tapestries and a library of 3,000 leather-bound books.

Though Astor died when the Titanic sank in 1912, and the hotel changed ownership, Astor's son Vincent repurchased it in 1935. About the same time, the hotel's most famous piece of artwork, the

RESOURCES

IF YOU GO

- The St. Regis Hotel, a five-star, five-diamond property is a member of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide. Published room and suite rates range from \$895 to \$13,000 per night, double occupancy, depending on the season and availability. Ask about special promotions and packages.
- For the latest information, call the hotel at 212-753-4500, or e-mail your request to stregisny.res@stregis.com. At the time of this writing, the Website had not been updated and is therefore unreliable. The hotel is at Two East 55th Street at Fifth Avenue, in Manhattan, 17 miles from JFK Airport and 10 miles from LaGuardia Airport.

whimsical "Old King Cole" painting by Maxfield Parrish, was moved from Astor's Knickerbocker Hotel to the St. Regis' Iridium Room, a popular dine-and-dance spot with an ice skating platform that rolled out from below the orchestra.

The painting still hangs behind the bar at the former Iridium, later renamed the Old King Cole Grille, where admirers gather to sit and examine it up close. You might want to order a Bloody Mary, invented here by barman Fernand Petiot, and you must ask one of the hotel staff to relate the anecdote that explains why the expressions on the faces of Old King Cole and his courtiers look as merry as they do.

In 1988, the St. Regis closed for the first time to update the 80-year-old infrastructure and to remodel the interior, reducing the number of rooms to 215, of which 66 are suites of varying sizes. A more recent renovation, due for completion in mid-2007, was undertaken to strip away the clutter accumulated over decades and highlight the hotel's original architectural details.

"The goal was to keep the turn-of-the century elegance, but show the hotel's bones," said Meg Connelly, a hotel spokeswoman, pointing out the elaborate crown moldings formerly obscured by heavy drapes. "Sills Huniford (a New York design agency) chose lighter, simpler fabrics and a simpler color scheme in all the rooms, for a cleaner, more contemporary look," she said.

The "bones," in fact, are very much in evidence. Marble floors, Palladian balustrades and columns gleam, as if they were installed yesterday. The Cognac Room, a small parlor where the ladies once gathered after dinner (while the men drank port and smoked cigars) has been transformed into a club room, with rich, dark colors and comfortable sofas.

In the Astor Court restaurant and piano bar, the original gold moldings, trim and Corinthian capitals, gold sconces, crystal chandeliers and pale ivory walls have been so meticulously restored they look brand-new. The ceiling and wall murals, decorated with fanciful scenes from mythology, have been cleaned and preserved.

The last task, redecorating the dining room, is scheduled to start shortly; hopefully, a top-flight chef who knows his or her audience will captain it. Until then, all meals and a full-dress afternoon tea are served in the Astor Court. As we discovered, most guests take advantage of the neighborhood's many excellent restaurants to dine out. If you want to boast that you're one of the first to experience the latest in New York luxury, book the new Bottega Veneta Suite, 1,700-square-foot overlooking Fifth Avenue, with an entry hall, large living-dining room combination, a bedroom with king bed, dressing room and two bathrooms.

Decorated by the clothing designer (Bottega Veneta), the seventh-floor suite relies on muted neutrals and earth tones, combined with unusual fabrics and textures to convey lushness and luxury.

All the rooms have plasma-screen televisions, indirect lighting, bottled water, separate tub, shower and toilet, standard tea and coffee service in the morning, daily shoe polishing and around-the-clock room service. Do stay long enough to let it all soak in.

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