

# Time travel: The ultimate guide to Asia's heritage hotels

Kate Springer, CNN • Published 4th September 2018



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(CNN) — Creaky wooden floors, teak antiques, afternoon tea, marble staircases. There's just something magical about a hotel with some history.

From Yangon to Hong Kong, many of Asia's most beautiful heritage hotels emerged during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

France and Britain still lorded over several colonies and the Suez Canal -- a waterway connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea -- had just opened in 1869. The route from Europe to Asia became significantly more accessible, resulting in prosperous trade routes and an influx of European travelers in the region.

While wealthy merchants are behind many of the region's grand hotels, others are the product of India's maharajas and government preservation projects. Here, we take [travel](#) through time to explore 24 of the region's most stately places to rest your head:

## Raffles Singapore

The grand dame of Singapore is set to emerge from a major restoration by the end of 2018/early 2019.

Originally opened in 1887 by the four Sarkies brothers -- savvy merchants and entrepreneurs -- the hotel has welcomed every manner of celebrity and diplomat over the years.

It's so rooted in Singapore history that the [government declared](#) the building a protected National Monument in 1987.

From gleaming wooden floors to open courtyard gardens, luxurious afternoon tea sets and spacious suites, the hotel has long been associated with old-world comforts -- not to mention the famous Singapore Sling, which was invented at the hotel's Long Bar.

This year, international architecture firm Aedas is leading the ultra-sensitive renovation project. The plan aims to re-imagine the social areas and dining experiences, refresh suites with updated technology and incorporate long overdue amenities -- such as soundproof bedroom windows -- while retaining the building's beautiful old bones.

[Raffles Singapore](#), 1 Beach Rd, Singapore 189673; +65 6337 1886

## The Peninsula, Hong Kong



The Peninsula Hong Kong is one of the city's oldest hotels.

Courtesy Peninsula Hong Kong

If the fleet of custom "Peninsula Green" Rolls-Royces in the driveway and white-capped pageboys standing guard by the door are any indication, The Peninsula has long been a top meeting place for Hong Kong's upper crust.

It's also one of the oldest hotels in the territory. The Pen, as it's nicknamed, opened in 1928, overlooking Victoria Harbour from its prestigious plot in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Despite a turbulent period during World War II -- when the hotel was requisitioned by the Japanese as their headquarters and, later, used as an asylum for refugees -- the hotel has generally been synonymous with colonial elegance.

Around the property, Old World charm meets avant-garde atmosphere in restaurants such as Felix -- designed by Philippe Starck. The guestrooms also have a more modern feel, thanks to a round of renovations completed in 2012. However, certain corners still feel like they've been locked in time.

Take award-winning Gaddi's. The high ceilings and French atmosphere come with grand chandeliers, leisurely lunches and white-gloved service.

Likewise, the ornate Lobby Lounge serves elegant afternoon tea sets soundtracked by a live string quartet, while Spring Moon has been a bastion of Cantonese fine-dining since it opened in 1986.

## Manila Hotel, Philippines

As you walk into the majestic lobby of the Manila Hotel, you'll immediately feel as if you're experiencing a piece of history.

It's the oldest luxury hotel in the city, having opened in 1912, and has long been the hotel of choice for visiting dignitaries. While some of the rooms and furniture could use an update, there are lots of modern touches such as Wi-Fi and individually controlled AC.

We recommend spending a lazy afternoon in the Champagne Room, where you'll enjoy afternoon tea and French pastries.

*[Manila Hotel](#), One Rizal Park, Manila, Philippines, 0913; +632 527 0011*

## Hotel Continental, Vietnam

Located downtown in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City's District 1, the Hotel Continental Saigon was founded during French colonial times.

Opened in 1880, with the intention of attracting upscale French travelers to the city, the hotel is just a short walk from the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon.

During the 1900s, the hotel welcomed an endless stream of foreign correspondents and several high-profile guests, including British writer Graham Greene.

The ownership changed hands multiple times following the Vietnam War (or the American War, as it's called in Vietnam). It temporarily shuttered in the 1980s, only to reopen again in 1989.

Today, the hotel still retains much of its classic charm -- candlelit street-side dining, wrought iron balconies, a frangipani-filled courtyard, wood-paneled rooms and excellent French cuisine.

*[Hotel Continental](#), 132-134 Dong Khoi, Ben Nghe, Quan 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; +84 28 3829 9201*

## The Strand, Myanmar



Luxury property The Strand is Yangon's oldest hotel.

The Strand Yangon

Having emerged from a major renovation in 2017, The Strand in Yangon balances old-world vibes with new-world style.

Dating to 1901, it's the city's oldest hotel. It remains a reminder of the city's cachet at the turn of the century, when it was one of the most important trade ports in Southeast Asia.

Dubbed "the finest hostelry east of Suez" by writer John Murray, the hotel was built by the prolific Sarkies brothers -- as was Raffles Singapore and the Eastern & Oriental in Penang.

The palatial columns and high ceilings attracted a mix of wealthy merchants, politicians and elite travelers, such as George Orwell, Britain's Prince Edward VIII, Noel Coward and Lord Louis Mountbatten.

For a period during World War II, the hotel was overtaken by Japanese forces and used as living quarters. Afterward, the hotel was left to decay until Indonesian hotelier Adrian Zecha took up the reins in 1989.

Zecha, who's also behind the Aman Resorts and Azerai hotels, restored the property with gleaming Myanmar marble, antiques and teak wood floors.

The most recent renovation took a similar approach, retaining the old-world atmosphere and furniture while updating the color palettes, fabrics and technology.

## Rambagh Palace, India

The Rambagh Palace will transport you back in time to the days when wealthy mahajaras ruled Jaipur.

Upon arrival, you'll be showered in rose petals for a traditional welcoming. From there, a palatial lobby opens into a majestic courtyard and the 47-acre grounds where princely peacocks roam free all day.

Originally constructed in 1835, the red and yellow palace was first used by the queen's favorite handmaiden. But in the 1900s, the royal family adopted it for their personal use following a refurbishment and extension.

It wasn't until 1957 that the mahajaras decided to convert the palace into a hotel, which eventually came under the umbrella of Taj hotels.

The palace quickly became the go-to destination for royal galas and weddings with special guests such as Prince Charles and Jacqueline Kennedy known to make appearances.

For a royal experience, we'd recommend taking the heritage tour around the sprawling property and staying in one of the "Historical Suites," which are kitted out with silk drapes, antique furniture and four-poster beds.

*[Rambagh Palace](#), Bhawani Singh Road, Jaipur, Rajasthan 302005, India; +91 141 238 5700*

## Tai O Heritage Hotel, Hong Kong

A hidden gem in Hong Kong, Tai O Heritage Hotel sits on the far western edge of Tai O on Lantau Island.

Hugged by trees, the colonial-style white building was built in 1902 and originally used as the Tai O Police Station, which protected fisherman from pirates trawling the South China Sea.

In later years, the crime rate was so low that the officers were relocated and left the building vacant. In 2012, the government enlisted the Hong Kong Heritage Conservation Foundation to revitalize the historic building.

It was transformed into a boutique hotel with just nine historical suites.

The original architecture features arched verandas and open-air corridors, while each room displays antique furniture and nostalgic images on the walls.

Every guest is invited to take an optional history tour around the premises, which identifies interesting architectural elements, former jail cells, cannons, interpreter's rooms, searchlights, Chinese tiled roofs, French windows and, morbidly, even a few bullet holes from a murder in 1918.

*Tai O Heritage Hotel, Shek Tsai Po St, Shek Tsai Po, Hong Kong; +852 2985 8383*

## Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi, Vietnam



The Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi offers 364 rooms.

Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi Hotel

A beautiful example of colonial architecture in Hanoi, the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi is easily the most luxurious place to rest your head in the city.

From the neoclassical facade to the interior garden courtyard, this 364-room address captures French glamor at its finest.

The hotel opened in 1901 during colonial times. Back then, visiting dignitaries and celebrities -- think Charlie Chaplin and writer Graham Greene -- would descend upon the hotel's streetside restaurant, often staying for the entire afternoon.

The glitzy aura subsided during the Vietnam War, when the hotel fell into disuse and desperately needed repairs. In the decades following the war, Pullman Hotels and Resorts came on board to revive the property to its earlier esteem.

Later, AccorHotels took over management of the prestigious hotel, where travelers are once again spoiled with gorgeous antique furniture, spacious rooms and appealing dining spaces.

When it comes to rooms, we'd recommend the historical Metropole Wing, which showcases preserved furniture, flooring and neo-classical touches.

## Eastern & Oriental, Malaysia

Sitting right on the coastline of eastern Penang, the Eastern & Oriental hotel was the very first hotel project by the Sarkies brothers, who were also behind The Strand in Yangon and Raffles Singapore.

When the hotel opened in 1885, the busy port city regularly welcomed wealthy merchants and travelers to its shores.

The wealthiest travelers rested their heads at the E&O, sipping on G&Ts at the wood-clad Farquhar's Bar or relaxing along the seafront.

After World War II, the hotel shuttered for a few decades until it was restored in 1996 and reopened in 2001 by the E&O Group. Today, travelers can best experience the old-world atmosphere in the Heritage Wing, where sea views, antique furniture and creaky wooden floors await.

*Eastern & Oriental Hotel, 10 Lebuh Farquhar, 10200 Penang, Malaysia; +6 04 222 2000*

## Raffles Hotel Le Royal, Cambodia



The Raffles Hotel Le Royal first opened in 1929.

*Raffles Hotel Le Royal*

Originally opened in 1929, the Raffles Hotel Le Royal sports a dramatic art deco facade and pretty English-style gardens that have lured luminaries like Charlie Chaplin and Jackie O.

The building fell into disrepair during the Cambodian Civil War but was later refurbished in 1997 by the Raffles hotel group.

Roaming the hallways, it's impossible to miss the aromas of jasmine and just-polished teak wood. The colonial atmosphere is balanced by local artwork -- seen in the ceiling frescoes above the bar and beaten copper sculptures outside.

Rooms encircle a pretty courtyard that features lush Frangipani trees and two swimming pools. We'd recommend making time for afternoon tea or happy hour at the Elephant Bar - the institution pours nearly 100 gins.

Tipplers may also appreciate the dedicated negroni menu, complete with a barrel-aged negroni, smoked negroni and a "negroni-to-go" concept.

*Raffles Hotel Le Royal, 92 Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh, Sangkat Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; +855 23 981 888*

## Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace Jodhpur, India

A destination in itself, Umaid Bhawan Palace is part royal residence, part hotel, part museum.

Maharaja Umaid Singh, the ruler of Jodhpur's at that time, commissioned the golden palace to be crafted in an Indo-deco style using sandstone and marble.

Work began in 1929 in the midst of a devastating famine. The maharaja hoped the project would employ thousands of farmers, who were hit hardest by the conditions.

Upon completion in 1942, the royal family moved in. While the original rulers have since passed away, their descendants still reside in a private wing of the building.

The rest of the mansion operates as a hotel and museum -- the latter of which tells the story of the Jodhpur royal family.

At the heart of the palace, a dramatic dome rises 103 feet tall and connects with an outdoor terrace. Here, you can enjoy breakfast or afternoon tea while overlooking the 26 acres of land where peacocks roam around the gardens.

There's also a Grecian-inspired pool in the basement, a library, tennis courts, several restaurants and historic suites kitted out with pink marble bathtubs and hand painted murals.

*Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace Jodhpur, Circuit House Rd, Cantt Area, Jodhpur, Rajasthan 342006, India; +91 291 251 0101*

## Belmond Governor's Residence, Myanmar



Belmond Governor's Residence was once the home of Myanmar royalty.

*Belmond Governor's Residence*

Set away from central Yangon in a quiet, leafy district, Belmond Governor's Residence feels like a secret garden.

The 1920s teak-wood mansion was originally owned by Samuel and Carapiet Balthazar -- wealthy merchants who were also behind the beautiful Balthazar Building in downtown Yangon.

Around the middle of the century, the government acquired the property and it became the residence of the Karenni (now Kaya) States in eastern Myanmar.

Decades later, the France-based Pansea Hotel Group discovered the property in the 1990s and teamed up with French designer Patrick Robert to restore the architectural details.

Now run by Belmond hotel group, it feels as if it's locked in another era. From the moment you arrive, it's all open-air corridors, secret gardens, intimate pools and top-notch service.

Even if you're not staying at the hotel, both the all-wood Kipling Bar and breezy Mandalay Restaurant are well worth a visit.

*Belmond Governor's Residence, 35 Taw Win Road, Dagon Township, Yangon, Myanmar; +95 1 230 2092*

## The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur

Before World War II, the neo-classical Hotel Majestic was the go-to rendezvous spot among well-heeled travelers and dignitaries.

Built in 1932, the colonial-era hotel was listed as a national heritage site in the 1970s before serving as the National Art Gallery for a stint from 1984 to 1998. More recently, YTL Hotels revived the property and added a new tower block, reopening as The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur in 2012.

Now part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, the palatial address combines classic glamor with modern touches -- particularly evident in the Majestic Wing, where the bar, ballroom and orchid conservatory are all located.

The 47 heritage suites are another highlight, thanks in part to the butler service and claw-foot tubs. You can also spot signs of the past in custom English furniture, Persian rugs and wooden fans not to mention the lingering traditional afternoon tea.

*[The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur](#), 5 Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin, 50000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; +603 2785 8000*

## Hotel Yak & Yeti, Nepal

As Nepal's first luxury hotel, the Royal Hotel opened in 1951 and quickly became a fixture on the social circuit. In particular, the Yak & Yeti restaurant and bar became known as an atmospheric spot to enjoy upscale drinks and dishes.

The success inspired the owners to build a new hotel: Hotel Yak & Yeti inside the historic Lal Durbar in 1977.

The red-marble palace still retains a royal atmosphere with neoclassical architecture, open courtyards, high ceilings, antique wooden fixtures, local crafts and historic artefacts.

The heritage deluxe rooms are well worth the upgrade: You'll be surrounded with colorful textiles and ornate wood carvings, from the mirrors to bed frame, door frames and ceiling accents. And for the most historic suite in the house? We'd recommend the Dynasty room -- this opulent suite was once the maharaja's bedroom.

*[Hotel Yak & Yeti](#), Durbar Marg, Kathmandu 44600, Nepal; +977 1-4248999*

## Amangalla, Sri Lanka

Built inside the 17th-century Galle Fort -- a UNESCO heritage site in southern Sri Lanka -- Amangalla promises open-air corridors, chilled tile floors and tropical gardens.

The address dates to 1684, when it was opened as the headquarters for colonial Dutch commanders and, later, British soldiers.

In 1863, the complex took on a new life as the New Oriental Hotel -- a mainstay for writers, politicians and celebrities.

In 2004, Aman resorts stepped in and renamed the hotel Amangalla. Though the name changed, much remains the same: there are private gardens, alfresco dining, 20-foot-high ceilings, and a veranda upstairs where monkeys often swing by.

*[Amangalla](#), 10 Church St, Galle 80000, Sri Lanka; +94 912 233 388*

## Settha Palace Hotel, Laos

Built in 1932, Settha Palace Hotel was long a stomping ground for ambassadors passing through Vientiane.

Later renovated in 1999, the mansion is a favorite among ambassadors and heritage enthusiasts -- the marble floors, grand chandeliers, rosewood antiques and high ceilings might have something to do with it.

Even if you don't stay here, a visit to La Belle Epoque Restaurant for pastries and coffee -- or something stronger -- is one of the most pleasant ways to while away an afternoon in Vientiane.

*[Settha Palace](#), 6 Pang Kham St, Vientiane, Laos; +856 21 217 581*



## Capella Singapore

Capella Singapore on Sentosa Island transports travelers back to the 1880s, when the now-protected colonial-era buildings once housed British officers.

Meanwhile, the clutch of 19th-century buildings is dramatically juxtaposed by contemporary designs by Lord Norman Foster. On the 30-acre grounds, you'll also find several 150-year-old trees and a gorgeous terraced pool.

*Capella Singapore, 1 The Knolls, Sentosa, Singapore; +65 6377 8888*

## Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor, Cambodia

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Take a 60-second video vacation to Cambodia's ancient temple sites in the Siem Reap Province of Cambodia. Filmed by Alexander Rosen and Wesley Bruer.

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In the heart of Siem Reap -- a short drive from UNESCO-listed Angkor Wat -- the Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor provides a regal homebase for explorers.

The hotel was decommissioned during the Khmer Rouge era and later rehabilitated in 1997 by the Raffles group.

The refined yellow facade stands tall, overlooking a grassy park, but heat-weary travelers will likely gravitate toward the Elephant Bar -- an institution that's known for its sundowners. From there, you'll admire the 1930s wood floors, old-school elevator and four-poster beds in each guest room.

*Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor, 1 Vithei Charles de Gaulle, Siem Reap, Cambodia; +855 63 963 888*

## Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin, Thailand



Thailand's very first luxury resort, Centara Grand opened in 1923.

*Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin*

Opened in 1923, Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin (originally known as The Railway Hotel) tells the story of Hua Hin's evolution from a small fishing village to thriving resort destination.

It began in the early 1900s, when Thailand's southern railway route finally linked Bangkok and the west coast by train.

Heading all the way down to Malaysia, the route granted easy access to the beautiful beaches and Hua Hin quickly became akin to Thailand's Riviera -- a seaside playground for the city's elite.

Developed by the State Railway, the colonial-style building was among the first hotels to emerge in the area when it opened in 1923.

It sets a luxurious tone across the 251 bedrooms, with European-style decor and romantic verandas that wrap around the building overlooking the Gulf of Thailand. A golf course and tennis court soon followed, as did an extension to keep up with demand.

*Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin, 1 Damnernkasem Road, Hua Hin, 77110, Thailand; +66 32 512 021*

## The Grand Hotel, Sri Lanka

The Grand Hotel is a fixture in the beautiful hilltown of Nuwara Eliya, which was a thriving colonial community in the 19th century. Built in 1891, the imposing manor house was originally the home of Sir Edward Barnes -- one of Sri Lanka's past governors.

The palatial address has an idyllic location, set in the heart of tea country right next to the Nuwara Eliya Golf Course in Sri Lanka's highlands. Thanks to the promise of cool mountain air and rich brandy, the area was a popular summer retreat for expats and titans of the tea industry.

The Governor's Suite is perhaps the best example of the traditional legacy, though you'll also get a taste of history with high tea on the lawn. Gin and tonic, anyone?

*The Grand Hotel, 5 Grand Hotel Rd, Nuwara Eliya 22200, Sri Lanka; +94 522 222 881*

## Yabshi Phunkhang Heritage, China

Decked out in colorful pillars and open-air courtyards, Yabshi Phunkhang Heritage hotel sits in the heart of Lhasa city's old town at 3,600 meters above sea level. The mansion dates back to 1938, first built for the family of the 11th Dalai Lama.

Home to 21 rooms, the humble property charms travelers with its gardens, artwork and excellent restaurant.

*Yabshi Phunkhang Heritage Hotel, 15 Beijing Middle Road, Lhasa, Tibet; +86 891 632 8885.*

## The Majestic Malacca, Malaysia



A one-minute tour of Malaysia's "historic state."

The Majestic Malacca lives up to its name.

Sitting pretty on the banks of the Malacca River -- a thriving trade port that once drew merchants from all over the world -- the hotel showcases a striking white facade.

Originally owned by a tycoon, the restored mansion retains its 19th-century allure with teakwood furniture, original Victorian tile floors, claw-foot bathtubs, silk drapes and stained-glass windows.

After the owner passed away, the building transformed into The Majestic hotel and became a popular accommodation for British colonial rulers and, after the country's independence in 1957, Malaysian ministers.

By 2000, however, the hotel was failing. YTL Hotels acquired the property and led a full restoration that was completed in 2008.

*[The Majestic Malacca](#), 188 Jalan Bunga Raya, 75100 Melaka, Malaysia; +60 3 2783 1000*

## Capella Shanghai Jian Ye Li, Shanghai, China

Located in the romantic former French Concession, Capella Shanghai Jian Ye Li opened last September in a former shikumen estate (a stone-gate residential complex) that was originally built in the 1930s by the Foncière et Immobilière de Chine real estate company to house mid-upper-income merchants.

The years weren't kind to the estate and, by the late 1900s, the beautiful buildings were crumbling.

In 2003, the Chinese government established the Hengfu cultural and heritage preservation zone to protect the unique architecture, then appointed Capella to incorporate a hotel into the compound.

A labyrinth of tiny alleyways that stretch across 2.3 hectares, the hotel converted the three-story brick townhouses into hotel villas, careful to preserve telltale details such as Chinese matou ("horse head") gables and open-air courtyards.

Along with the luxurious accommodations, travelers will also find French chef Pierre Gagnaire's first restaurant in mainland China: le Comptoir de Pierre Gagnaire.

*[Capella Shanghai Jian Ye Li](#), 480 West Jianguo Road, Shanghai 200031, China; +86 21 5466 9928*

## Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok

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Temples, tuk-tuks and spicy street food in Southeast Asia's beating heart

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First known as The Oriental Hotel, this property has been sitting on the banks of the Chao Phraya River for more than 140 years.

It's a step back to a time when luggage was carried in trunks, dinner dress was de rigueur (tropics or not) and tea on the veranda was served with a stiff G&T to ward off mosquitoes.

The Mandarin Oriental's riverside grandeur has revived (and inspired) many a weary literary soul sampling the charms of Siam, including the likes of Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham, Norman Mailer, Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway.

Its historic Oriental's Author's Wing, which recently underwent a massive refurbishment, retains its magical aura with its picturesque parlors. (High tea here is simply too civilized for words.)

The Garden Wing offers similar heights of nostalgic luxury, while the modern River Wing and Tower have a more contemporary design.

*[Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok](#); 48 Oriental Avenue, Charoenkrung, Bangkok 10500 Thailand, +66 2 659 9000*