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Beyond Raffles: seven of Asia's lesser-known colonial hotels, some gone but not forgotten

Around the turn of the 20th century, the Sarkies brothers built an empire of heritage hotels from Singapore to Indonesia. But the entrepreneurial siblings weren't responsible for all of Asia's best boutique properties, some of which still welcome guests.

Topic | Luxury Hotels**Ed Peters**

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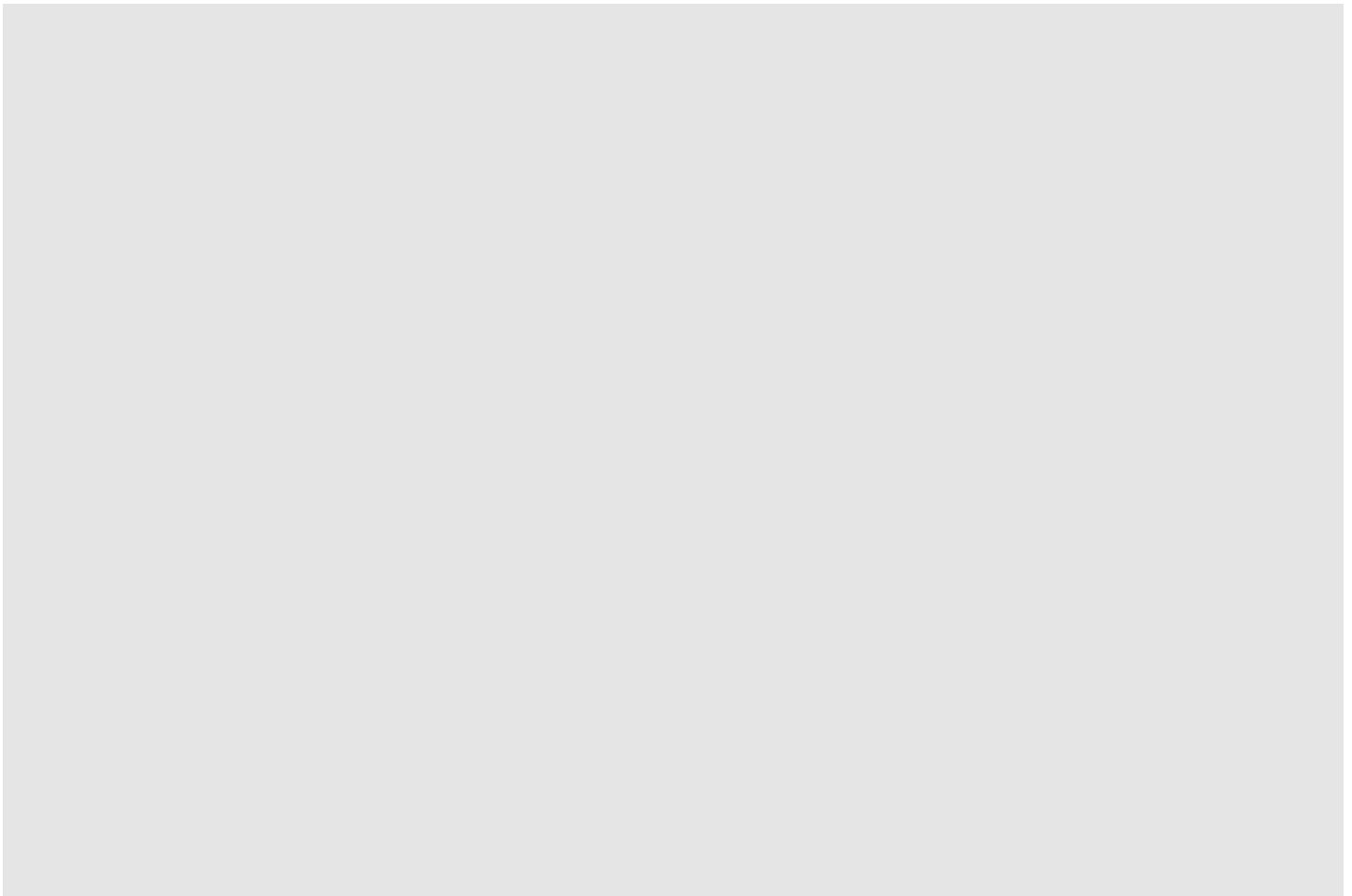


Asia's heritage hotels dot the map like lighthouses, beacons of hospitality and repositories of history. Many of them were founded by the Sarkies, a quartet of farsighted Armenian brothers and their assorted relatives from Isfahan, in Iran.

They figured out there was money to be made by bridging the gap between the increasing interest in travel at the turn of the 20th century and the dearth of decent accommodation. Other entrepreneurs were not slow to jump on the bandwagon, realising a healthy profit from clean sheets, taps that gushed water when they were supposed to and dining rooms free of wildlife both on and off the plate.

The Sarkies' most successful ventures – including Raffles, in Singapore, and the Eastern & Oriental, in Penang, Malaysia – continue to thrive, dollied up and corporate logo'd but still balanced neatly atop the five-star pyramid. Others have languished or disappeared altogether, victims of changing appetites or shifting bottom lines.

And while the likes of The Strand, in Yangon, Myanmar, and Amangalla – formerly the New Oriental Hotel – in Galle, Sri Lanka, can proudly assert their cock-of-the-heritage-walk status, their lesser-known cousins also have a tale to tell.



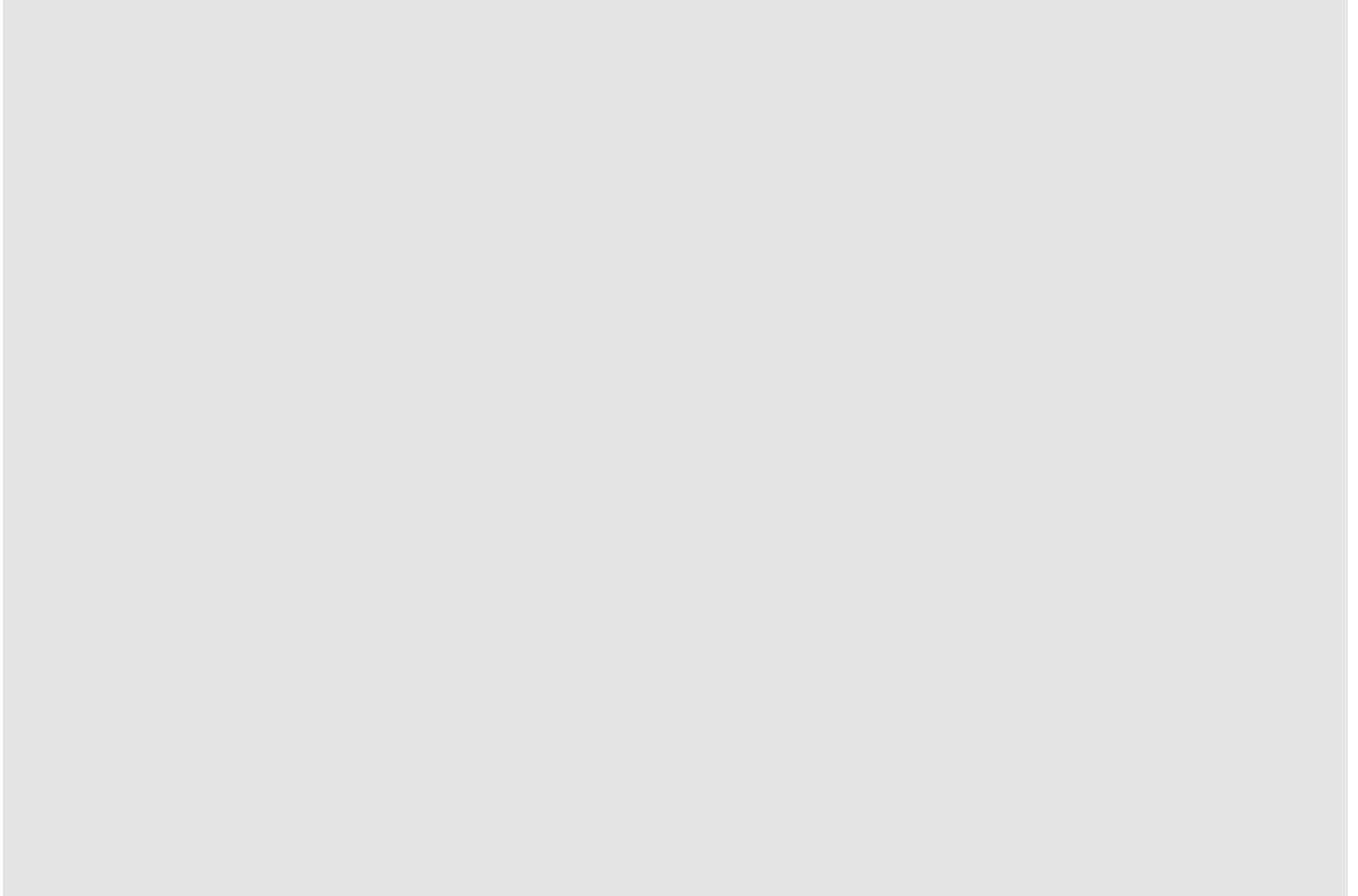
The original Sea View Hotel in Tanjong Katong, Singapore. Photo: Handout

The Sea View, Singapore

It might be argued that Raffles – Qatari-owned and reopened in August after a two-year renovation – is now even further removed from the 10-room hotel the Sarkies pioneered in 1887. Well and truly branded, it is perhaps Asia's best-known heritage property. But it wasn't always the only Sarkies hotel in Singapore.

The Sea View Hotel, in Tanjong Katong, was more or less in the countryside when the Sarkies took it over in 1923. Essentially a set of rambling colonial bungalows, it was both an getaway from the city and somewhere to recuperate after an illness. If Raffles was the city slicker, then Sea View was the country mouse, with a seawater swimming pool, tennis, golf and the occasional cabaret. The 1936 edition of *Willis' Singapore Guide* – the TripAdvisor of its day – described it as “one of the city's three leading hotels”.

Alas, the good times were not to last. After passing out of the Sarkies' control, the hotel was crippled by a three-month strike in 1963 and closed not long after. It was demolished and a new hotel of the same name arose about 1.5km to the east, but that closed in 2003 to be replaced by a condominium called – why not stick with a catchy moniker? – The Sea View.



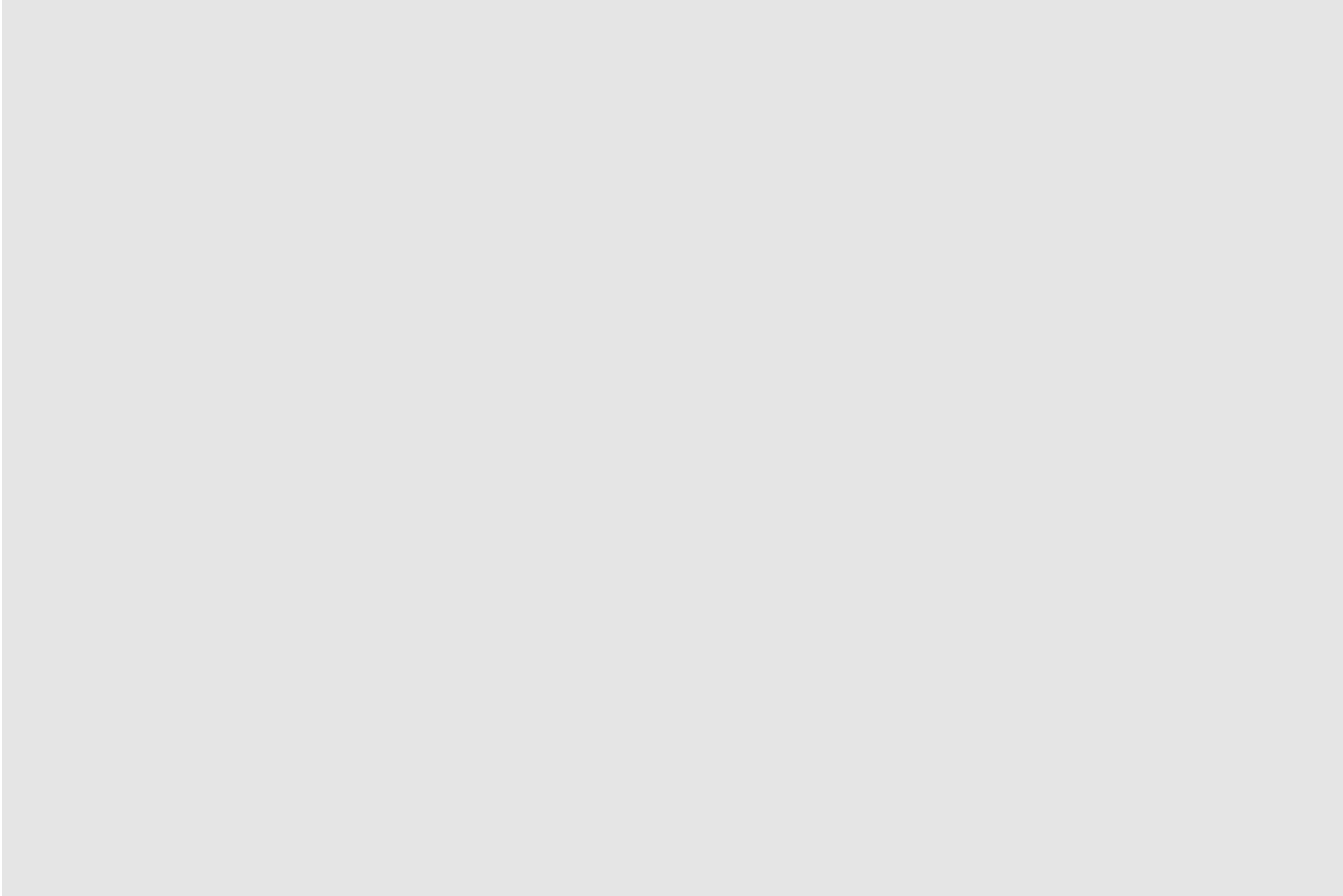
Penang's Crag Hotel. Photo: Handout

Crag, Penang

Penang's most prominent monument to the Sarkies is the [Eastern & Oriental](#), a manicured wedding cake of a hotel that basks on the seafront in George Town. Less prominent, and not remotely manicured, the brothers' Crag Hotel sits abandoned and forlorn atop Penang Hill.

The siblings took over a sizeable villa in 1905 and set about turning it into an airy alpine retreat. Surveying the main building a century later, architects from Selangor's Universiti Teknologi admired its wide verandas and terracotta floor tiles, adding: "the Western and Eastern architectural elements create a synergy between the ecological and technological advancement of that particular era."

Initially, the Crag was a popular place in which to escape the summer heat, but it never really recovered after World War II. It closed for good in 1954, and was turned into a school, which lasted until 1977. It has since enjoyed a couple of excursions into the limelight, standing in for Vietnam in *Indochine* (1992), a French film starring Catherine Deneuve, and for Shimla in *Indian Summers*, a British colonial period television series that one critic described as “a work of subtlety, intelligence and some beauty” – which pretty much sums up the Crag in its heyday. All it needs now is a cashed-up visionary entrepreneur to restore it to its former glory.



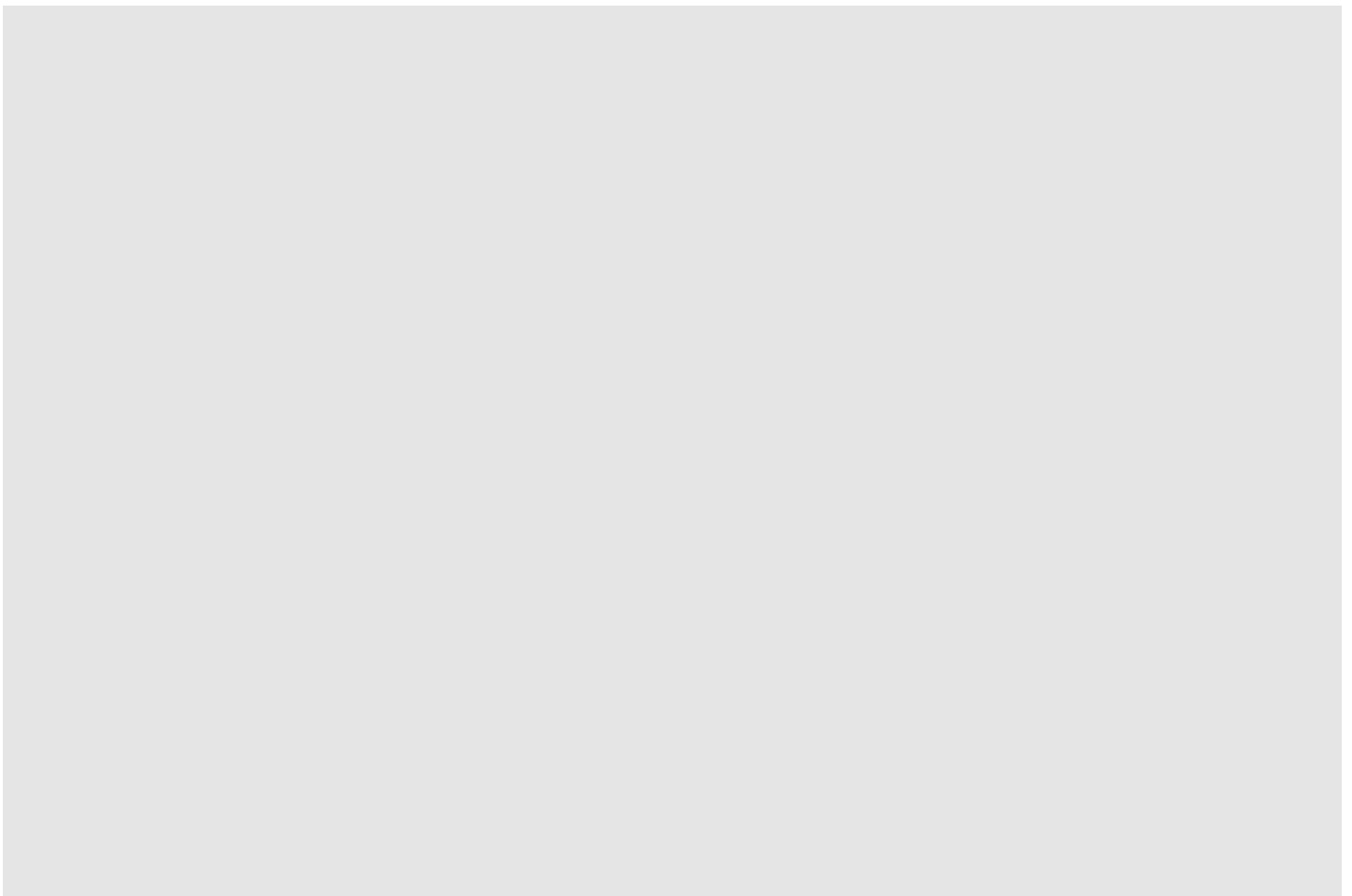
Kartika Wijaya, in Java. Photo: Kartika Wijaya

Kartika Wijaya, Java

Batu, due south of Surabaya and more than 1,000 metres above sea level, on the southern flank of Mount Arjuna, in Java, Indonesia, has slipped off the see-before-you-die list. But in the 19th century, the hill station won a name for itself with its clean, cool air, magnificent rainforest vistas and a cornucopia of fruit, vegetables and flowers that seemed to grow with little cultivation.

The Sarkies weren't the first to open a hotel here – and there were many luxurious holiday villas in the area – but they were quick to introduce their highly successful brand of hospitality, throwing open the Kartika Wijaya's doors in 1891. The hotel is still going strong, proud of its antecedents, but as a simple respectable four-star with 114 rooms, pool, spa and what the website calls “our infamous kids playground”.

The Sarkies' other hotel on the island is larger and rather better known. Opened in 1910 and given a fabulous art deco makeover in the 1920s, the Majapahit, in Surabaya, made the brothers more money – but apparently they far preferred their Batu boutique, often popping in for a holiday.



Shanghai's Mansion Hotel. Photo: Handout

Mansion, Shanghai

North of The Bund and the “legendary” Peace Hotel – branded Fairmont since 2010 – is another of China’s select boutique heritage properties. Not so much a “hidden gem” as a mobster’s den, The Mansion (built in 1932) was the headquarters of the Green Gang, which speaks volumes about the profile of Shanghai’s pre-war criminal fraternity. Gang boss Du Yuesheng – nicknamed Big Ears – and his cohorts would drop in to shoot the breeze and plot at leisure, but also found property development (their hideout’s official guise) a handy way to launder ill-gotten gains.

The building was turned into a hotel in 2007, with 24 rooms and suites and a rooftop restaurant. A fanciful historical plaque outside states the original building was designed by “Lafayette”, although there was no architect so named in the city then.

“The hotel’s stucco facade has art deco elements applied to a feng shui-sensitive structure,” says Spencer Dodington, an architectural expert who co-founded Shanghai-based Luxury Concierge China. “The renovation wasn’t entirely sympathetic, and while the guest rooms do not have any original historical detailing, at least the lobby is full of 1930s Shanghai photos and memorabilia.”




The Hill Club, in Nuwara Eliya. Photo: The Hill Club

The Hill Club, Nuwara Eliya

Think “heritage” in Sri Lanka and the automatic choice is the Galle Face, in Colombo, opened in 1864 and for many years run by the eccentric Cyril Gardiner, who declared the hotel provided “yesterday’s charm and tomorrow’s comfort”, although many guests took issue with the second part of his statement.

However, a drive up the winding highway into the central hills leads to Nuwara Eliya, and the 144-year-old Hill Club. With its red-tiled roof and mock Tudor timbers, it could have been teleported from England’s home counties. Inside, its 44 guest rooms are still tinged with the austerity of a gentlemen’s club while the billiards room, reading room, gym – not “fitness centre” – and dress code (“jackets and ties may be borrowed free of charge”) speak of a far-off era.

Everything that attracted the club’s early members – racecourse, golf, tea gardens, hiking trails – is still very much in evidence. As Canadian-Sri Lankan poet Michael Ondaatje recorded: “It’s 20 degrees cooler up here than in Colombo, and a sourceless light seems to brighten the landscape from underneath as if yellow flowers in the gardens are leaking into wet air.”



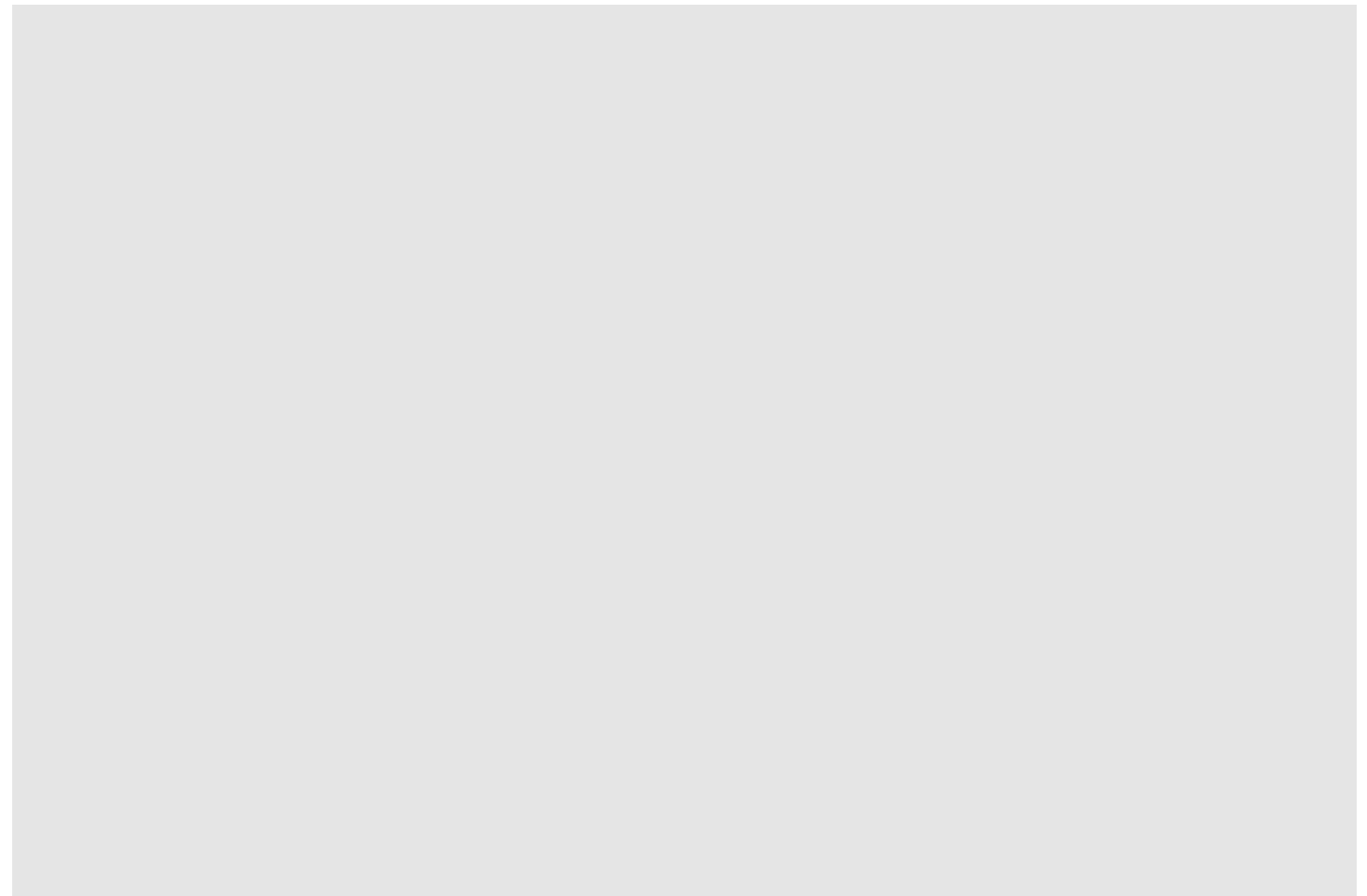
The Grand Hotel Metropole, in Hanoi. Photo: Getty Images

Metropole, Hanoi

An advertisement for the Grand Hotel Metropole in 1901 promised: “Every Comfort. Perfect Hygienic Arrangements, Lighted by Electricity, and all Modern Improvements.” As such, it had no rival in Hanoi, and prospered mightily.

The brainchild of two French businessmen, André Ducamp and Gustave-Émile Dumoutier, the Met (now with 364 rooms, and part of the Accor behemoth) can hardly claim to be hiding its light under a bushel, especially following the addition of a distinctly modern wing in 1996. Yet its deliciously graceful French colonial style ensures its status as an architectural landmark, and the interiors of the original building – including a generous teak staircase – are an enthralling time capsule. As far as ambience goes, this is undoubtedly Asia’s most authentic heritage property.

It’s certainly got one of the best celebrity guest lists. Charlie Chaplin honeymooned here with Paulette Goddard and there are suites named after writers Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene. Most impressive, perhaps, the bunker where peace activists Jane Fonda and Joan Baez sheltered during bombing raids has been reopened as a memorial to war victims.



The Pousada de São Tiago, in Macau. Photo: MGTO

Pousada de São Tiago, Macau

There's probably no sharper metaphor for the changes that have swept over Macau in recent years than the fate of the Pousada de São Tiago – owned by gaming corporation SJM – which hosted its last guests in 2017.

When it came to heritage, the Pousada had it in spades. Built into a centuries-old fortress, with merely a dozen rooms, a splash pool, a Spanish restaurant, and its own wishing well, chapel and slightly eerie enclosed stone staircase leading up to the front door, it was unique not just in Macau but the whole of China. There was no swifter antidote to the slings and arrows of life in Hong Kong than checking in here for a couple of nights – as myriad weekenders discovered from 1981.

However, the hotel's accountants were far from delighted by its finances, which contrasted sharply with Macau's new breed of monster hotels with attached casinos. So, for the moment, São Tiago's doors are shut, with no sign of their reopening. RIP.

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