



# SOUTHEAST ASIA'S GRAND STAYS

Bearing a combination of legacy and heritage alongside modern-day luxury appointments expected of such eminent properties, come with PRESTIGE on a sojourn to some of Southeast Asia's most cherished grand hotels.

Words: DAVID BOWDEN



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Several years ago, I stayed at the Radisson Blu Altstadt Hotel in Salzburg, Austria, which dates back to 1377. It was almost impossible to fathom that this grand property with wooden ceilings, intricate stucco, and antique artwork could be almost 700 years old and still offer welcoming hospitality.

While grand hotels should be impressive, they also need to offer a glimpse into the past when travel was a real adventure. Travel in the 19th-century golden era was mostly for the well-to-do, as it involved extended voyages on ocean-going steamers. Back then, communication was limited, and knowledge of distant places came from travellers who documented their journeys long after they returned. Books and movies have featured these hotels, while myths and legends about each property perpetuate their mystique and help lure guests.

Several hotels were opened in Southeast Asian ports of call to accommodate travellers. Many remain as timeless icons of bygone elegance, and most continue to cater to discerning travellers seeking to indulge in all that they have to offer. Colonial-era

properties attract visitors with their historic charm, but contemporary amenities keep them popular globally.

Some guests seek to simply step back into an age when journeys were measured in weeks, not hours, when travel was an art, and simply reaching the destination via a long sea voyage was the reward.

Signature suites, named after famous guests who have graced these hotels, are another hallmark of a grand hotel. I have seen the beds that Donald Trump (Hotel Metropole, Hanoi) and Charlie Chaplin (Raffles Grand d'Angkor, Siem Reap) slept in during their visits.

All these properties gained favour for their personalised service, attention to detail, uncluttered interiors, refined and decadent offerings, and sense of elegance

and splendour. They were unashamedly for the travelling elite; indeed, travel itself was mostly elitist then and the exclusive domain of the moneyed class. While none of these hotels are cheap, they are more accessible now that more people can travel.

Travellers have always aspired to stay in these hotels and always



PHOTOS: DAVID BOWDEN AND THE VARIOUS HOTELS



Today, the hotel has 119 stylishly appointed rooms and suites, a 35m pool inspired by Angkorian architecture, a spa, and a range of food and beverage options, including the renowned Elephant Bar. Staff can organise curated experiences, such as sunrise tours of Angkor on a Vespa.

Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor offers more than just luxury; it provides an immersive journey into Cambodia's storied past, making it an essential destination for discerning travellers seeking both comfort and cultural enrichment.

### **EASTERN & ORIENTAL, PENANG**

Situated prominently along the Penang seafront, the Eastern & Oriental Hotel, commonly referred to as the E&O, serves as a testament to the distinguished era of Far East travel. established in 1885 by the Sarkies Brothers, the same Armenian hoteliers behind the famed Raffles Singapore and The Strand in Yangon, the E&O became the jewel of Malaya's colonial hospitality.

With its shimmering white façade and sweeping verandahs, the E&O was the

playground of estate managers, writers, and merchants who found respite here amidst teakwood floors, rattan furniture, and ceiling fans that worked overtime to temper the tropical weather. It was, and remains, the only seafront heritage hotel in George Town, affording guests uninterrupted views over the Straits of Malacca towards the alluring Andaman Sea.

The E&O's charm lies in its seamless blend of historic grandeur and contemporary comfort. Its Victory Annexe, named after the original 1920s wing, features black-and-white marble, representing the elegance of a bygone time. It's a hotel that hosted literary luminaries like Somerset Maugham and Hermann Hesse, who found inspiration in its tropical setting and colonial grace.

What impresses me most is the lobby dome with its reverberations, refined English afternoon teas served in Palm Court, and a stroll along the seafront promenade before a cool beverage in Farquhar's Bar.

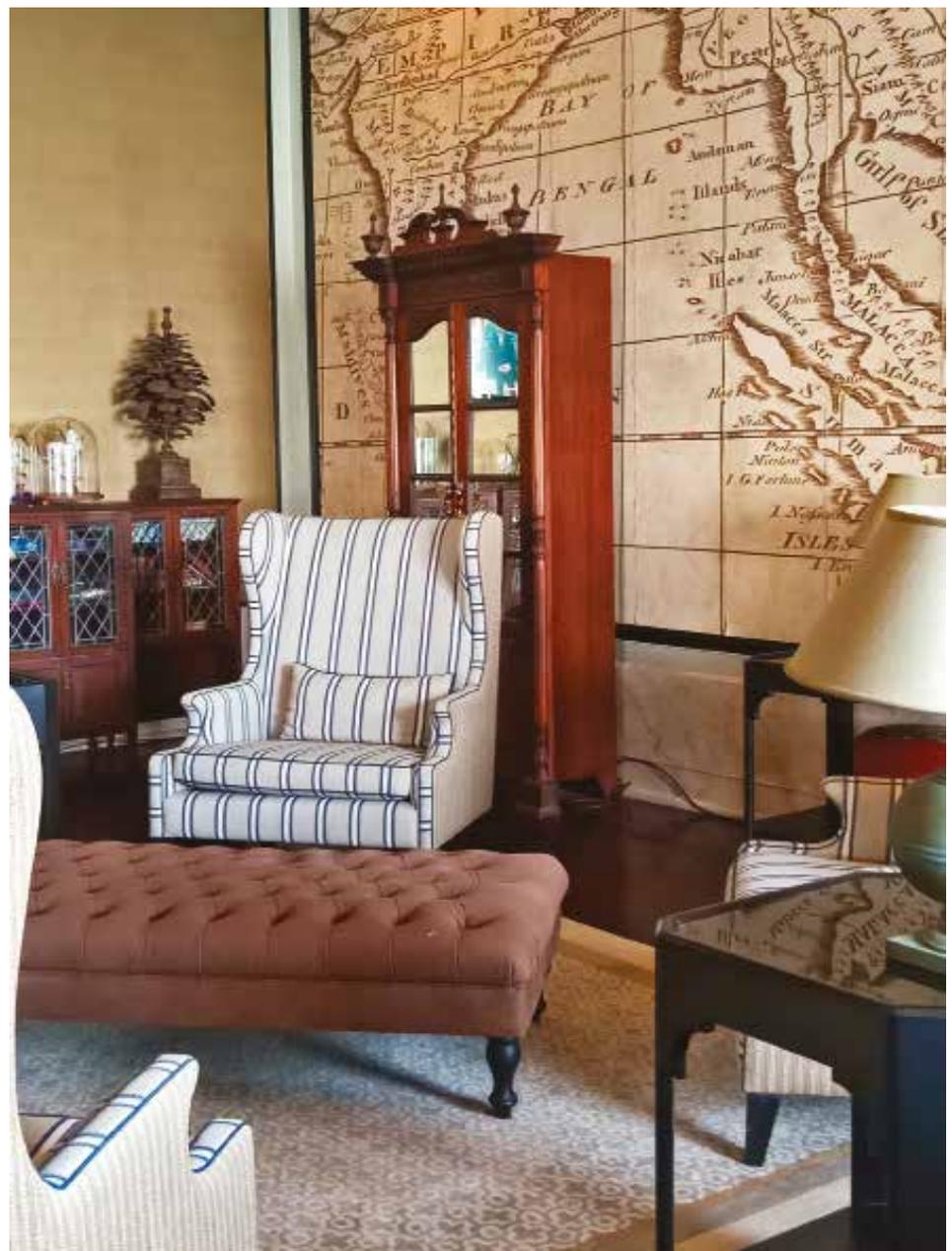
The E&O invites guests to take in its storied past, impeccable service, and unshakeable sense of place.

will. While many regional hotels occupy heritage buildings, only a few were initially constructed as hotels. Grand regional hotels such as The Fullerton Singapore, Anantara Chiang Mai, and Sofitel Luang Prabang operate in repurposed heritage buildings, but the seven Southeast Asian heritage properties listed below have always been hotels. These are my favourite regional hotels to visit.

### **RAFFLES GRAND HOTEL D'ANGKOR, SIEM REAP**

Opened in 1932, the Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor occupies an important chapter in Cambodia's heritage and the golden age of Asian travel. Designed by French architect Ernest Hébrard, the hotel blends Art Deco with Khmer influences to create a tropical oasis of luxury and sophistication near the expansive waters of Tonle Sap. It originally accommodated adventurers who set off on elephants to the nearby Angkor archaeological site. Over the decades, the hotel has hosted distinguished guests, including Charlie Chaplin, Jacqueline Kennedy, Princess Margaret, and Michelle Obama.

In 1997, the property underwent a meticulous restoration under the Raffles brand. Historical features were preserved, while contemporary amenities were added. While the original elevator remains a cherished feature, most guests find the staircase quicker.





### RAFFLES SINGAPORE

Opened by the Sarkies Brothers two years after making their mark in Penang, Raffles Singapore began as a modest ten-room bungalow on Beach Road. Named after Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore, the hotel quickly became a refuge for seafaring adventurers and the local elite. By the early 20th century, the number of suites grew and introduced amenities like electric lighting and ceiling fans, set new standards for regional hospitality.

Over the decades, Raffles Singapore has been home to writers, heads of state, and royalty. In 1915, bartender Ngiam Tong Boon crafted the now-iconic Singapore Sling at the hotel's Long Bar. While retaining its essential ingredients, it was refreshed to cater to contemporary palates. While still the hotel's most popular beverage, guests seeking more personality in their cocktail should head to the Writers Bar, which celebrates the illustrious authors who have graced Raffles.

The hotel underwent a significant renovation from 2017 to 2019, enhancing its facilities while preserving its historical fabric. Today, Raffles Singapore has 115 suites, each offering impressive décor and personalised butler service. There is a range of dining options, including the renowned Tiffin Room, which has been serving North Indian cuisine since 1892.

Raffles continues to be a symbol of elegance and a must-visit destination for its elevated levels of hospitality. It seemed only appropriate that scenes from *Crazy Rich Asians* were filmed in Raffles Singapore.



### MANDARIN ORIENTAL, BANGKOK

Located along the Chao Phraya River, the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, stands as a beacon of luxury and style. Established in 1887 by Danish entrepreneur Hans Niels Andersen, it was the first luxury hotel in Siam (now Thailand), introducing to the region innovations such as electric lighting and carpeted hallways.

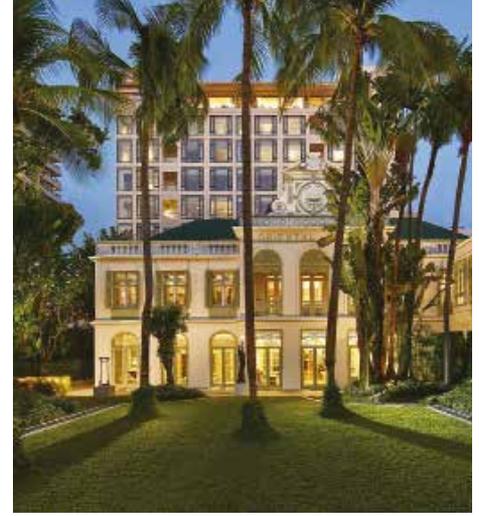
Over the years, the hotel has hosted a myriad of renowned guests, including royalty, political figures, and literary luminaries such as Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, and James Michener.

The Authors' Wing, the original building, houses suites named after these celebrated writers. The Bamboo Bar, established in the 1950s, was Bangkok's first jazz venue and remains a popular spot for drinks and music. In 1993, the hotel introduced the Oriental Spa, Thailand's first city spa, offering a serene escape with traditional Thai and modern Western therapies.

Its location along the Chao Phraya River makes it a favourite for well-heeled travellers or visitors who want to take in the historic setting over afternoon tea in The Author's Lounge or dine at Baan Phraya or Le Normandie.

### RAFFLES HOTEL LE ROYAL, PHNOM PENH

Opened in 1929, Raffles Hotel Le Royal in Phnom Penh is a living testament to Cambodia's colonial era and its subsequent development as an independent nation. Also designed by Hébrard, the hotel seamlessly blends French colonial architecture with Khmer detailing, creating a unique and timeless aesthetic. Its grand opening by King Sisowath Monivong marked the beginning of its illustrious history.



Over the decades, the hotel has accommodated distinguished guests, including Jacqueline Kennedy, who, on her 1967 visit, was served a champagne cocktail that became known as the 'Femme Fatale', a tribute to her elegance and grace. It is a signature cocktail served at the Elephant Bar, which is undoubtedly one of the region's finest bar lounges.

During the Khmer Rouge era, the hotel became a refuge for journalists reporting on the war but soon after, it fell into disrepair. In 1997, after extensive renovations, it reopened as Raffles, restoring its former glory while embracing modern luxuries.

Today, Raffles Hotel Le Royal offers 175 elegant rooms and suites, each reflecting the charms of a bygone era. Guests can indulge in traditional Khmer and French cuisine at Restaurant Le Royal or relax beside serene swimming pools.





**CENTARA GRAND BEACH RESORT & VILLAS HUA HIN**

Opened in 1923 as The Railway Hotel, Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin is one of Thailand’s iconic heritage hotels. The State Railway of Thailand commissioned the hotel during King Rama VI’s reign to serve royals and aristocrats arriving at the seaside resort via the new railway line from Bangkok. Its colonial architecture, featuring teak furnishings and expansive verandas, quickly established it as a luxurious retreat.

Its proximity to the royal summer palace and tranquil beachfront made it one of the few local destinations for relaxation. It blossomed in an era when the steam train journey here was a wondrous adventure.

Renovated, remodelled, and extended over the years, it changed its name to Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin in 2007. Today, the beachfront resort has 251 guest rooms and suites, along with 42 private villas, all set amidst lush topiary gardens backing its prime beachfront location.

A standout feature is the hotel’s 100-year-old elephant statue, Khun Chokedee, which graces the gardens and serves as a symbol of good fortune. Guests can also enjoy a variety of dining options, including the Railway Restaurant, which pays homage to the hotel’s origins with its classic Thai and Western cuisine. Interestingly, a new high-speed rail link to Bangkok could introduce a new era of golden travel to Hua Hin.

The hotel, featured in the 1984 movie *The Killing Fields*, was a representation of the Hotel Le Phnom (Raffles Hotel Royal) in Phnom Penh.



**SOFITEL LEGEND METROPOLE HANOI**

Opened in 1901, as the Grand Métropole Hotel, the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi has played an important role in Vietnam’s eventful history. Designed by French architect Gustave-Émile Dumoutier, the hotel became a hub for diplomats, writers, and celebrities. Notably, Graham Greene penned *The Quiet American* during his stay, and Charlie Chaplin honeymooned here in 1936.

During the Vietnam War, the hotel became a refuge for diplomats, the media, and government officials. Its underground bomb shelter, rediscovered in 2011, once protected guests like Jane Fonda and Joan Baez during aerial bombardments. The shelter, now part of the ‘Path of History’ tour, serves as a poignant reminder of the staff’s resilience and shared wartime hardships.

The hotel has undergone several renovations, with the last in 2023. This involved the reopening of its Heritage Wing with 103 rooms that blend heritage detail with modern comforts. Original features,

such as wooden floors and Italian marble bathrooms, were preserved, while custom-made furnishings and modern conveniences were incorporated to enhance the guest experience.

My favourite experiences here are savouring the French cuisine at Le Beaulieu, including a sumptuous Sunday Champagne brunch, relaxing by the pool, and sipping cocktails in the stylish Angelina’s Bar. 🍷

