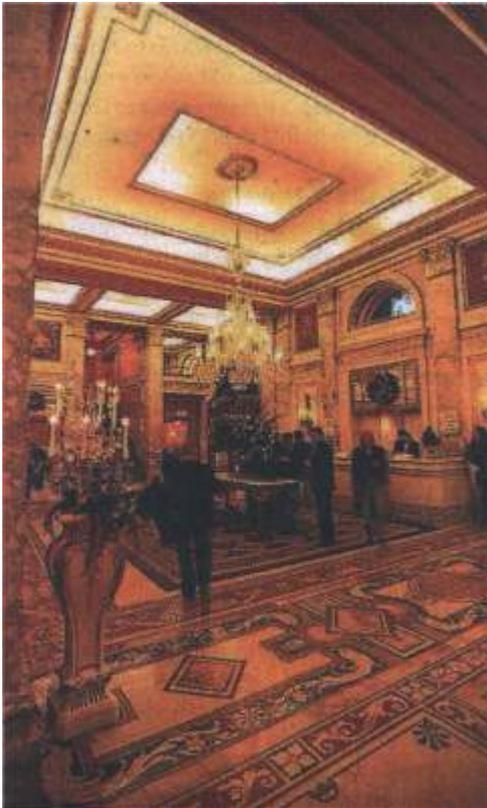


Grand entrances

Hotel lobbies provide fascinating glimpses of another world, writes **Lee Tulloch**.



Tantalising ... the lobby at New York's Plaza.

I can't put my finger on the moment I developed a passion for hotel lobbies but I suspect it was fuelled by my teenage obsession with Hollywood movies of the 1930s, particularly those of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or Carole Lombard, which invariably featured scenes set in the grand lobbies of hotels such as New York's Waldorf Astoria. Not surprising, then, that when I first went to New York in 1983 and walked into the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, where I was soon ensconced in a magnificent suite, I felt instantly as if I had come home.

Growing up in Melbourne, the nearest thing we had to a grand hotel lobby was the Windsor on Spring Street. I did an inordinate amount of lurking about there, soaking up the slightly musty Victorian atmosphere. Captain Peter Jansen, who occupied the entire top floor of the hotel, seemed to me to be the most rakish, romantic man in the southern hemisphere. When I began to write a novel about an Australian woman who travels the world sleeping with the wealthy men she meets in hotel lobbies, it seemed appropriate that I start her story in a fictional hotel not unlike the Windsor.

Like Eloise, the little girl who lived in the Plaza in Kay Thompson's books of the '50s, or *Valley Of The Dolls* novelist Jacqueline Susann, who lived for 36 years in the Navarro on Central Park South, I fully intended to make my home in a hotel one day. (I still do.) Failing



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that, I soon discovered that taking up a chair in a suitably glamorous lobby and watching the passing parade gave me the vicarious experience of being a guest.

Whenever I travelled, even on the tightest budget, I'd seek out that city's most gorgeous hotel and prop. In London, I'd skip lunch and dinner, saving all my pennies for afternoon tea at the Ritz, where you could sit for hours in luxury and be plied with food by waiters who were delighted to see a young woman eat. (Tea at the Ritz cost £4 then; it now costs £35 and reservations need to be made weeks ahead.) Only recently, I paid a small fortune for a glass of wine in the lobby lounge at the George V in Paris but felt it was worth every euro to be entertained by some of the world's very rich at leisure. Unlike Violet Armengard, my heroine in *The Woman In The Lobby*, I'm not a participant in any of this. But – oh yes – I'm certainly a voyeur.

In the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*, which starred Greta Garbo as an ageing ballerina and John Barrymore as an elegant jewel thief, a character

makes an observation about the lobby: "People come and go. Nothing ever happens." Not true at all, in my opinion. A hotel lobby is a place of transition between public and private spaces but it's also a theatre set, a stage for people to reinvent themselves, pretend to be someone else, act out fantasies or connect with strangers and move the narrative to another location. Andre Balazs, the Los Angeles hotelier (Chateau Marmont, The Standard), says, "A good hotel sets up a zone of comfort and security that envelops you ... and encourages you to do things you wouldn't necessarily do in your own environment." And Ian Schrager, the owner of notoriously theatrical hotels such as the Gramercy in New York and the Delano in Miami, concurs. "Escapism central" is what he calls his hotels.

It's not all glamorous, of course. A lot of waiting goes on in hotel lobbies, some tedium and, occasionally, unpleasant things. Russell Crowe threw a phone at a testy desk clerk at the Mercer in New York. Callgirls entice politicians in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel in Washington,



Guest appearances ... a lobby can be a microcosm of an unequal world and you have to establish your place in it right away.
Photos: Photolibary, AFP





DC, where the New York Governor, Eliot Spitzer, had a tryst with Ashley Alexandra Dupre. In *The Graduate*, Benjamin Braddock is excruciatingly embarrassed trying to book a room for himself and Mrs Robinson. In the grim Romanian film *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, a young woman tries to get past a series of stony-faced desk clerks to book her friend a room for an illegal abortion.

I've met some wonderful people in hotel lobbies but I've also had my fair share of wrangles with snooty concierges, including the Parisian concierge who denied for days he had found my precious notebook (left by mistake at the desk) until I was instructed by a French friend to give him a hefty tip. I suppose much of the success of the Julia Roberts-Richard Gere fantasy *Pretty*

Woman, which takes place in the Beverly Wilshire hotel in LA, is due to the fact that we cheer for the young hooker when she triumphs over the shop assistants and concierges who have made her life hell.

A hotel lobby can be a microcosm of an unequal world and you have to establish your place in it the moment you walk through the revolving doors. If you want your own Cinderella experience in this particular theatre, you need to wear a "costume." A gracious but haughty demeanour is essential.

The best hotel lobbies, to my mind, create a tantalising kind of foreplay to whatever goes on upstairs. Unfortunately, the trend these days in hotels is to make the lobby a more efficient space

by removing much of the seating – so the foreplay has to be very fast indeed. I despair whenever I find myself in an expensive hotel that feels, well, corporate, with a lobby that's more like a holding pen than a destination in itself.

In Australia, we are particularly badly served – I can't think of a lobby here, except perhaps for Palazzo Versace on the Gold Coast, that has the decadent opulence of the lobbies of the great European hotels, such as the Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo. Lobbies don't come much more extravagant than this: a fantasy of golden marble columns and arches, mirrored walls, crystal chandeliers with a leadlight dome (plus an Alain Ducasse restaurant for good measure).

I don't mind if a lobby is a bit shabby and

dusty as long as it has a good coating of atmosphere. The charm of the old Roosevelt on Hollywood Boulevard is a lobby furnished with dark leather club chairs and dripping, gothic candelabras, and the ghosts of Theda Bara and Rudolph Valentino.

Perhaps Australian hoteliers are too prosaic and fail to understand the value of a good entrance or appreciate the art of useful time-wasting, of which I am an expert.

Vicki Baum, the Austrian novelist who wrote the novel upon which the film *Grand Hotel* is based, has one of her characters comment at the conclusion of the story, "There is a strange thing with guests in this hotel. No one goes out the door the same way they came in." I venture to say that is the effect all great hotels should have on us.

The Woman In The Lobby by Lee Tulloch (Viking, \$32.95).

THE LOBBYIST'S LIST

Most beautiful new lobby

The Four Seasons Gresham Palace (pictured above) on the Danube, Budapest.

Best lobby to pick up a wealthy corporate date

Four Seasons Hotel George V, Paris. For people who find money sexy.

Lobby with most dubious past

The Athenee Palace, Bucharest. Once a hothouse of Cold War-era intrigue, with spies, bugged rooms and maids instructed to rifle through guests' drawers.

Lobby with highest likelihood of film stars

Easy. The Carlton, Cannes, from May 14-25.

Best afternoon tea

A toss up between the Windsor, Melbourne, and the Peninsula, Hong Kong.

Lobby with biggest culture shock

The Imperial, Tokyo. As big as an airport, with hundreds of black-suited Japanese businessmen, tended by the occasional geisha.