



IF IT'S OPULENCE YOU SEEK, LOOK NO FURTHER



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St Regis Abu Dhabi, bang on the capital city's Corniche, is a must visit hotel for a dose of good old-fashioned British sensibilities, sophistication, style and service, says **Scott Armstrong**

Have you noticed that the faster life gets, the more modernity sweeps us up in the latest innovations, how the past always has a claim on our affections?

Sometimes it can be your actual past, with scents and sounds placing you right back at a singular moment in time, when for a moment that feeling of being back then and there is undeniable.

And then there is the imagined past, the romantic call from decades ago when life moved at a different pace, when people were kinder and the world was still an undiscovered marvel waiting to be discovered one country at a time.

It is that nostalgia for the ideals of the past that has seen characters such as Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes defy the years and remain as loved today, perhaps even more so, as they were years before.

So, what on earth has all that rambling to do with a hotel? Well imagine if you took the characters of *Downton Abbey* and asked them to open a hotel in the Gulf, perhaps St Regis Abu Dhabi, bang on the capital city's Corniche, would fit the bill more than many places.



In fact any expat in Oman still misty-eyed after watching the Christmas special of the UK hit drama could do worse than head across the border for a dose of good old-fashioned British sensibilities, sophistication, style and service (in fact one of the actresses actually stayed there recently).

For what the St Regis does incredibly well is allow you to suspend disbelief and be gently led into the illusion that for a brief time inside its doors the 1920s and 30s live on gracefully.

That is no small feat because, forgive me for shattering the image, the St Regis on Abu Dhabi's Corniche opened its doors just 18 months ago. And many aspects of the property are brand new. In theory there should be no feeling of history, of times gone past.

However as you walk through the doors into the lobby, its grand split staircase sweeping up before you, the property quickly seduces you. The soft lighting, the plush carpets, the deep red velvet armchairs, the marble columns, all sing of a different era.

After you check out you will marvel at the science of it all, how cold bricks and mortar (well marble) can evoke a warm sense of nostalgia. It's fantasy of course, but the spell is so well woven that while you are in it you are one of those sophis-





ticated adventurers that Agatha Christie wrote so well about.

What completes the illusion though is in fact very real, and that is the service guests receive from the staff, who seem genuinely proud to be part of the St Regis family.

They are the very definition of courtesy without seeming stiff, light touch without being distant, and efficient while exuding welcome. This is perhaps the lost art of being a hotelier, not just a hotel.

It's worthy of mention (and I know I haven't even described the rooms yet) that St Regis is part of the Starwood chain, and yet this property on the Corniche, and its team, don't feel like a franchise, it feels so much more personal than that.

This is a hotel that channels the spirit of great British institutions such as London's esteemed The Dorchester. That of course is the real deal with its own long and proud history, but the fact that in the middle of the Gulf the St Regis conjures up similar feelings is a real testament to a job well done (especially as there are no St Regis properties in London).

The rooms don't just continue that illusion, they deepen it with chandeliers, sofas and deep beds adding to the magic.

Each room comes with a breath-tak-

ing view of the Corniche, with your lofty position providing the perfect place to watch the sunset on the breakwater. Unusually for a UAE hotel the rooms also manage to create a relaxed, even cosy, mood despite the sunshine flooding in through floor to ceiling windows.

Perhaps it's the thick carpet underfoot, or maybe it's the dark rich tones in the wood that contrast with gold and yellows of the walls and fabrics, but again that feeling of warmth, security, nostalgia. The fact each room comes with a butler dedicated to your needs just adds another layer to the illusion you are living a Christie novel.

Dusk is a great time to be in your room also, with Abu Dhabi's city view stretching out before you, the traffic on the Corniche many floors below seemingly like fireflies.

If you can tear yourself away from the view and the relaxing confines of your



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room, then food and drink await.

The St Regis Bar on the ground floor is one of those places you could imagine Phileas Fogg planning his trip around the world, while The Terrace serves up great British fare. It's a shame that recently this changed from Rhodes 44, run by celebrity chef Gary Rhodes, but despite this recent change standards have not dropped, in fact the inclusion of a Friday brunch has only added to the eatery's popularity.

And St Regis has an eccentric little surprise with the inclusion of Villa Toscana, an unpretentious intimate Italian restaurant that quietly oozes charm and fine food in equal measure.

For those in search of a little relaxation by the beach the Nation Riviera Beach Club is available to guests, a private stretch of sand and sea with pools, health club and restaurants. The fact that St Regis can even reclaim the word 'riviera' and make it classical again is another hat tip to the debonair attitude of this excellent hotel.

Vacations however brief should be escapes, and St Regis Abu Dhabi charmingly obliges by submersing you in service and sophistication. For a brief moment you can breathe deep and easy, forget today's world and be a citizen of a golden age.