



Tuck in: Queen Victoria was a regular for high tea at Brown's.



Historic: Alexander Graham Bell made history at the hotel in 1876.



Nothing could be finer: every Brown's Hotel room is different.

Heaven in a hotel

It's luxury all the way at this mini-palace of indulgence, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**

A MAYFAIR address has always spelt prestige, and not only on the Monopoly set. Queen Elizabeth II was born in this inner-London area, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dwight Eisenhower and Jimi Hendrix have all lived within the high-end streets and swanky squares of London's premier postcode.

For those of us without a Mayfair address, we can but dream or book into Brown's Hotel to indulge our Mary Millionaire within.

As a writer I was intrigued by London's oldest hotel, which inspired Agatha Christie and Ian Fleming and where Rudyard Kipling wrote *Jungle Book*.

Brown's Hotel has long been a quintessential London experience for the well-to-do. Founded by Lord Byron's butler, who acquired the property in 1837, the hotel was then run by the Ford family, who bought the premises in 1859.

The visitors' book since then is a veritable encyclopedia of history. Alexander Graham Bell made the first-ever telephone call from the hotel in 1876. Napoleon stayed here in 1871 after fleeing France. Theodore Roosevelt laid his head in Brown's in 1886. Queen Victoria was a regular for high tea. Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had their honeymoon here, and the exiled Greek royal family used it as their official court from 1924-35.

Today you can expect to run into politicians, financial maestros and entrepreneurs in the subtle-hued dining room of the Albemarle restaurant, which serves traditional British fine-dining fare.

Touring Americans and European fashionistas indulge in a heavenly high tea with pink bubbles in the parlour rooms. Models and musicians hang out in the cool, retro-inspired Donovan Bar, sipping on a selection of 60-plus cocktails.

Brown's Hotel is actually a collection of 11 Georgian townhouses linked through a maze of hallways reminiscent of an Enid Blyton novel if it weren't for the modern lighting and plush carpet.

The hotel has had a £24 million renovation and reopened in 2005 with a basement boutique day spa and 117 guest rooms, including 29 suites.

No hotel room is the same, varying in size, layout and decor, but all pay tribute to the literary world with a collection of first-editions, hardbacks and antiquarian books for guests' reading pleasure.

I've never been a fan of the twee Laura Ashley-style print hotel rooms that Britain has long specialised in, where my nose itches from the dust still lingering from Victorian times. The obligatory four-poster beds, heavy quilted bedspreads, lamps inspired by Beatrix Potter and breakfast of black pudding do



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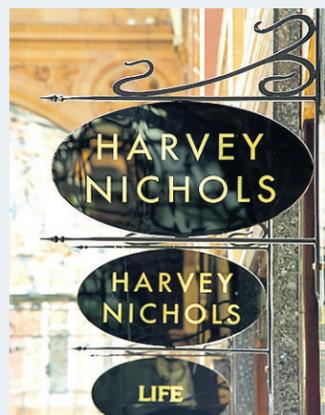
Where: Brown's Hotel, London. A member of the Leading Hotels of the World. From £199 a night for special weekend rates.

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Nearby: Dover St markets for high-end fashion designers; Harrods and Harvey Nichols department stores (right) in Knightsbridge; Selfridges department store on Oxford St; Buckingham Palace in St James; the theatre district of the West End.

Getting there: Emirates Airline flies from Melbourne to London via Dubai from \$2346.

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nothing for me. But, thankfully, the oldest hotel in London has managed to blend the old and the new in an inspiring manner.

Traditions are kept, with free shoe shines, a well-connected concierge who can get tickets to sold-outs shows, and attention to detail that goes beyond the call of duty. A passing comment from me about my jetlag-driven insomnia and I return to my room later to a tray of sleeping teas and lavender eye patches.

There is nothing stuffy about Brown's decor or clientele. The building itself is a testament to history and this is highlighted by wood panelling and high ceilings in the tea rooms.

But the rooms are spacious and light. They have modern bedding in which to lose yourself, iPod docking stations and funky mini-bars.

Upgrade to a deluxe or a suite and have your pick from the pillow and mattress

menu with 300-count Egyptian cotton or 100 per cent Irish linen, a packing and unpacking service and a programmed mobile phone.

It's primarily a business hotel during the week, when it's nigh on impossible to secure a room. But the hotel has invented a series of "experiences" designed to make the most of its strengths and lure romantics and families.

Personal trainers accompany guests on running tours and kiddie and teen spa treatments are available in the spa. Executive chef Lee Stretton, formerly of the Ivy, Savoy and Le Caprice, runs culinary days.

GUESTS have morning coffee with Stretton and peruse the famed Borough Markets as he chooses his produce, then return to the hotel for a demonstration and lunch.

It's hard not to be impressed at Brown's. The only downside is that some room windows look into others.

My London friends are impressed and all swing by for a look, though most don't go further than Donovan Bar's Brownie in a Box cocktail, perching themselves at the bar until the lights go out.

In a city famed for its five-star hotel names, it's comforting to know there's a five-star boutique premises that is more like a home than a hotel.

Above: Brown's Hotel, which is actually a collection of 11 Georgian townhouses linked through a maze of hallways, has had a £24 million renovation and reopened in 2005.