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First look inside the Waldorf Astoria New York after a \$1 billion makeover

*We speak to interior designer Jean-Louis Deniot about the
historic hotel*

By **Melissa York**

Impressions: 17,900,000



Residents of the Waldorf Astoria tower will pay from £1.31 million for a studio flat

Occupying an entire block of midtown Manhattan, the Waldorf Astoria New York has been the hotel of choice for presidents, royalty and A-list celebrities since it opened in 1931. At that time, the 47-storey hotel was the largest and tallest in the world. The author Ward Morehouse III described it as “a kind of vertical Beverly Hills”.

It was bought in 2015 by Anbang International, a Chinese company, for \$1.95 billion and its doors have been firmly shut since 2017. The reopening, now expected in 2022, is two years behind schedule but the first batch of residential apartments that will be part of the exclusive hotel’s new look go on sale next week.

The Waldorf’s location, a few steps from the United Nations’ headquarters, has always attracted a powerful crowd. Every US president since Herbert Hoover has stayed or lived in the hotel’s presidential suite, which is decorated in classical Georgian style, much like the White House.

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The hotel's entrance on Park Avenue, New York

The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh stayed on their first trip to the US and a banquet for them was held in the grand ballroom. Countless celebrities and dignitaries have visited and an unusually high number have moved in, from Marilyn Monroe to Cole Porter (who has a suite named after him). Its restaurants claim to have invented the Waldorf salad, eggs benedict and thousand island dressing.

Its reputation lured diplomats and politicians to live in Waldorf Towers. Some, such as Hoover and Dwight D Eisenhower, were there for decades.

In a way, the Waldorf Astoria has always been half-hotel, half-residence, but its billion-dollar renovation will make it official. The Towers will have 375 luxury apartments and there will be an equal number of hotel rooms.

Two thirds of the flats will have no more than two bedrooms and prices for studios start from £1.31 million.

There will be 100,000 sq ft of hotel facilities and other areas only for residents including a pool, cinema, function spaces and a roof terrace.

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the international architects practice behind One World Trade Center in New York and the world's tallest skyscraper, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, has been restoring the 1930s design on large parts of the building. Artefacts such as Cole Porter's piano and the 1893 World's Fair Clock Tower will also make a comeback.

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The apartments are "neutral, but with personality", says the designer Jean-Louis Deniot

Inside the Towers, however, the antiques have been replaced with modern, slick interiors by the Parisian designer Jean-Louis Deniot. He says he is well acquainted with the whims of New York's elite, having owned a Manhattan home for two decades.

"I can tell you that if you're lucky enough to be in that bubble at the Waldorf, you will have the best of both worlds," he says. "You'll be able to enjoy the bustle of the city while feeling protected, and you'll be able to entertain in a great building."

The Towers are the least historic part of the building, so Deniot had the freedom to start from scratch when he took on the project three years ago. "Instead of having art deco pastiche, I got to use my own decor reminiscent of it. You can stay in one of the rooms and not know whether you're in the past, present or the future.

"The Waldorf was quite French in style anyway, so they nodded to that with some French classical furniture. It was good for the time, but I think now it's out of touch. I don't see the point in bringing a Louis XVI chandelier designed in 1770 to a 1930s building."

Each apartment is "neutral, but with personality" he says, acknowledging that the Waldorf Astoria's international buyers will bring their own designers.

"I wanted to make sure that they would have a great canvas to play with. We paid a lot of attention to the symmetry, proportions, the logic of the layouts."

The hotel's buzzy atmosphere comes from its transient population, he says, so he wanted to reflect this in the residents' communal areas. "I wanted to take the exuberance of the natural world instead of filling the halls with crystal — that would

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have been so predictable. A lot of the shapes are very naturalistic; any type of plant structures, seeds, leaves.”

The 8,000 sq ft roof terrace has a tropical theme, with exotic plants and palms, and the winter gardens provide year-round greenery to revive residents in harsh New York winters.

One of Deniot’s favourite creations is the 25m swimming pool, a first for the Waldorf Astoria. He designed floor mosaics inspired by a 1920s Japanese kimono. It is floral and feminine, a subversion of the hotel’s masculine Gatsby glamour. “I love the mix of casual and grand the most. You can be in a skimpy bathing suit in the most grand pool area you’ve ever imagined. I love the silliness of that.”



Apartments are likely to be redesigned by the incoming owners

High-profile designers and architects are a big draw for New Yorkers, and there has been a global resurgence in hotel residences.

“Over the past ten years, there’s been this fight for differentiation,” says Liam Bailey, the head of research at Knight Frank, the agency marketing the residences in the UK. “For the Waldorf, it’s about the heritage and backstory. The New York market is a well-evolved luxury market, but there has been a lot of unsold stock in 2018/19.”

He says that activity also slowed due to changes to tax law in 2017 that led to large tax bills for high-income households and hit states with high property prices, such as New York and California, particularly hard.

Meanwhile, British investors have been waiting for property price adjustments to offset the unfavourable dollar-to-pound exchange rate.

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“On our reckoning, prices in New York fell 2 or 3 per cent last year. Coming into this year, they seem to have levelled out and we’re expecting those to stay flat,” Bailey says. “Things have just started to pick up again and it’s an interesting time.”



Paris Hilton, Coco Chanel and Robert de Niro have been long-term hotel residents

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Many famous faces have graced the lobby at the Waldorf Astoria New York, not least Paris Hilton who practically grew up in the hotel. Her family owned it and sold it to Anbang International for nearly \$2 billion. Frank Sinatra also kept a suite there from 1979 until 1988.

It is not the only hotel to attract permanent residents. Coco Chanel famously lived in a 2,000 sq ft suite in the Ritz in Paris for 34 years. The suite is named after her and so is the spa, which offers Chanel treatments.

Margaret Thatcher checked into the Ritz in London when she was 87 to recuperate after surgery and was invited to stay indefinitely.

The hell-raising actor Richard Harris lived in the Savoy in London. While being carried out on a stretcher shortly before his death in 2002, he allegedly raised his hand and told diners: “It was the food.”

The billionaire businessman Howard Hughes preferred Los Angeles, where he lived in one of the bungalows at the Beverly Hills Hotel on and off for 30 years. He requested roast beef sandwiches to be left under a tree outside the door and guests staying in the Howard Hughes suite today can order mini versions from room service. Robert De Niro prefers the Chateau Marmont in LA, where he is known to live on and off in one of its penthouses.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/first-look-inside-the-waldorf-astoria-new-york-after-a-1-billion-makeover-qzn9f696t>