

INDIA TAKES MANHATTAN

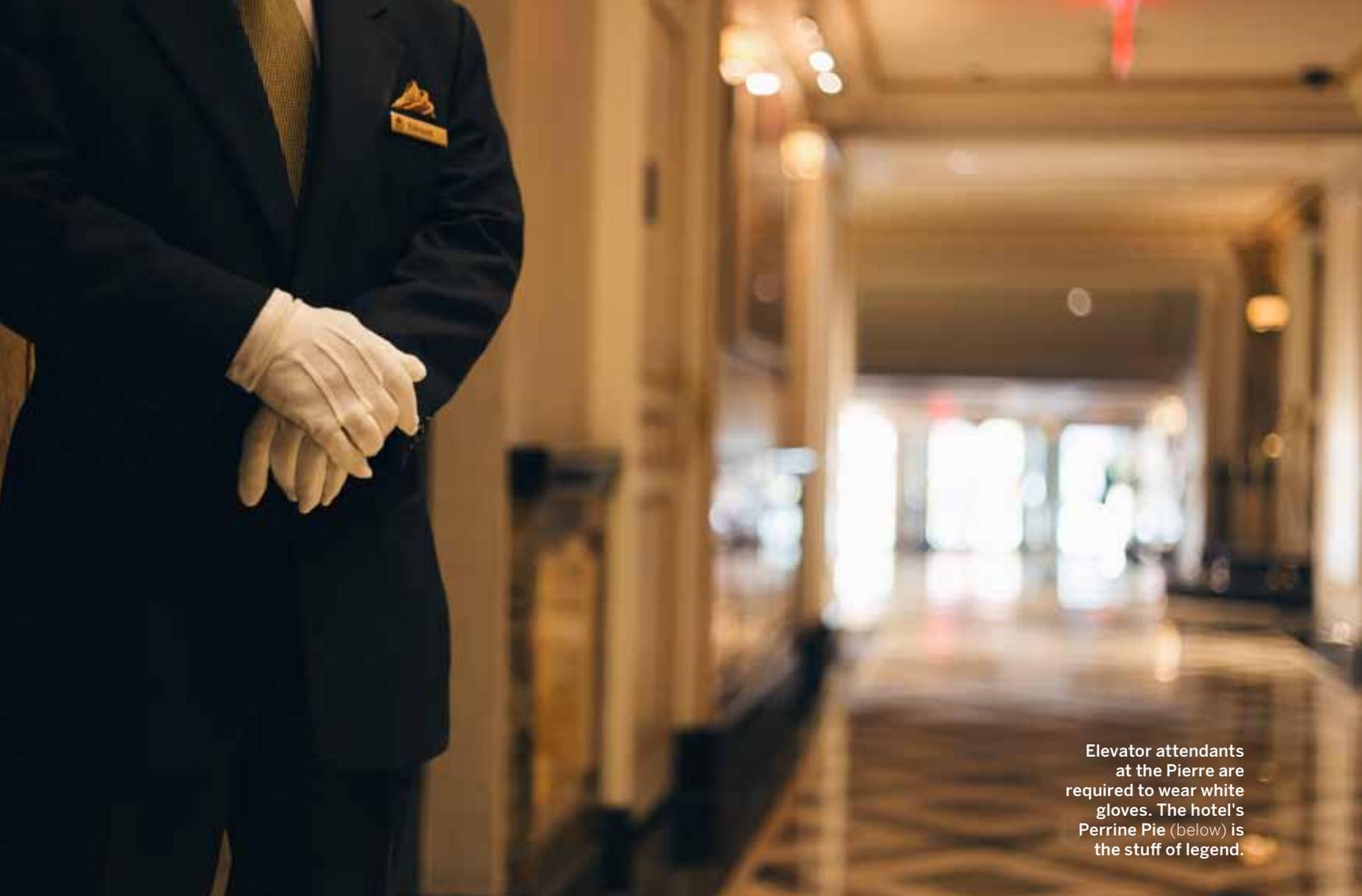
U.S.A.

An aerial view of the Pierre, outside whose entrance (inset) the Indian tricolour flutters alongside the American flag.

A TAJ PROPERTY SINCE 2005,
THE PIERRE HAS A NEW YORK SOUL
AND AN INDIAN HEART

BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA





Elevator attendants at the Pierre are required to wear white gloves. The hotel's Perrine Pie (below) is the stuff of legend.

Flags are commonplace in the United States. They're hoisted outside homes, convenient stores and government offices. Striped red, white and blue, even shirts aren't spared. In America, people do wear their patriotism on their sleeve. As my cab drove up Manhattan's East 61st Street, I did not expect to see the Indian tricolour, and I certainly did not expect to be overcome by a bout of sudden, alien nationalism.



Since 2005, the Pierre has been a Taj hotel. The flag made sense, but I was looking for a stay that was quintessentially New York. Having opened in 1929, the Pierre, I was told, was my best bet.

The lobby didn't make a fuss about itself, and Anupam Guha, the Taj Royal Attaché who checked me in, hadn't yet acquired an American twang. Anupam worked at Delhi's Taj Mansingh before he was transferred to the Pierre in 2011. He spoke in a manner that was immediately friendly and familiar. "Our clients don't just want the luxury experience. They also want to stay in someplace iconic." After some prodding, Anupam confessed, "Indian clients want the Taj. Europeans and Americans want the Pierre."

Today's Pierre, I found, worked that balance well. My room, for instance, was not hyper modern. Its wallpaper, furniture and lamps would have been comfortable in any era. The only Indian touch here was the soap in the shower. It had been made from Rajasthani sandalwood. I drew the curtain to its side.

I wanted sunlight. The view of East Side Manhattan left me staggered. If I had a cape, this would be my Gotham.

Not just did the Pierre have elevator attendants, they also wore white gloves. Asking me for my floor, Khady Gueye was naturally chirpy. August 24, for her, was an anniversary. She completed 27 years at the hotel. I asked her if anything has changed over time. "Everyone is still beautiful," she smiled. "When they are in my elevator, I hear them call their friends and ask, 'Do you know where I am?' They then very proudly say, 'The Pierre!'" Elizabeth Taylor, she tells me, once owned an apartment in the building. "She would come for dinner. Then Dolly Parton and Bobby Brown stayed here. Abhishekh Bachchan was here too. I told him his father looks better than him. I just wanted his attention, but he gave me a huge hug."

After I demanded a tour, I was taken to the Cotillion Ballroom where a blind Al Pacino had danced the tango in *Scent of a Woman*. The brash and talented executives of the television series

Mad Men had once made the Pierre's room 435 their temporary office. Coco Chanel, Priyanka Chopra and Robert Downey Jr. had all been guests. Even Audrey Hepburn had checked in when filming *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. It was, however, only in the Tata Presidential Suite on the 39th floor, that my jaw dropped as quickly as all those names. Standing at its window, I could see the exact point where Central Park bordered the East Side, separating it from Manhattan's west. It was like someone had drawn a neat line between a forest and the city. I felt I had seen New York at its most beautiful. I was not wasting my time.

The Two E Bar/Lounge near the reception downstairs was empty when I walked in. I had chosen the wrong hour. On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, a jazz band plays at night. I believe if you close your eyes real tight, concentrating on the double bass, you feel transported to the decades when the space used to be a Gentleman's Lounge. The smell of bourbon and cigar smoke has to be conjured. If you visit Two E Bar at the time I did, you are more likely to smell scones

and jam. Its evening tea is very popular.

With its recently restored murals, the Rotunda Room is the perfect setting for a romantic dinner date, but if like me, you find yourself single in an otherwise tempting Big Apple, you are advised to bite into the food at Pierre's signature restaurant, Perrine. I was respectful of its French-American menu, and so I first ordered the tuna tartare. I hardly had to chew on the fish. It was soft enough to melt. But I was still feeling hungry, and the chicken curry appealed to my newly acquired nationalistic sentiment. The curry compared to the best butter chicken I had ever eaten. Despite being satiated, I did devour my dessert.

The next morning over breakfast, I caught up with the Pierre's Executive Chef, Ashfer Biju. "I'm from Kerala," he said. "I am a true-blue Malayali who grew up on very good food." Ashfer first helped reopen the Pierre in 2009, and then moved to New York permanently in 2011. He told me the curry I had eaten the night before was made using a recipe that was nearly 65 years old. "In the 1950s, the Pierre housed an Indian restaurant called The Grill Room, and

we have only tweaked its preparation a little." The chef then confessed to adding spice to his sea bass: "I'm adding a little love." I went on to ask, "So Chef, is this an Indian or New York hotel?" He laughed. "We are a New York hotel that serves *idli* for breakfast." ■

ESSENTIALS

The Pierre has 140 guest rooms and 49 suites with views of New York's Central and Manhattan's East Side. (taj.tajhotels.com/en-in/the-pierre-new-york; doubles from \$500/₹32,500).



Looking out of the Tata Presidential Suite window, you see Central Park and Manhattan intersect. Other suites like the Rajput (top) are equally sumptuous.

