

## The Top of the Town

Review by Jane Teeling  
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People thought things couldn't get any higher uptown when the Four Seasons opened its doors in 1993. Were they wrong.



**A** well-known New York designer in her day, my Aunt Nicole used to say that if nature calls when you're in Manhattan, head to either one of the three Bs (Bergdorfs, Blooming's, Barneys) - or to the **Four Seasons**, which, after its grand opening in 1993 had edged out her old standby, the Plaza. That Aunt Nicole optioned only these restrooms reveals - among many other things - that she rarely strayed from the radius of Central Park.

Like any New York landmark, the Four Seasons New York means a lot of things to a lot of people. It was the talk of the town when it opened, and the buzz has yet to die down in a city that never sleeps yet nonetheless cares deeply about the quality of its hotel rooms.

But no one holds as visceral an image of the place as that maintained, emotionally and financially, by its creators.

Architect I.M. Pei was commissioned to design something as fantastic as his most controversial creation, La Pyramide Inversée at Paris' Louvre Museum. If you've ever seen the big glass pyramid then you'll recognise Pei's fingerprints all over the Four Seasons NY. Black-paned polyhedron lanterns burst from its façade, extending all the way up to the cruciform crown. For the walls, Pei went for the same French Magny limestone used in the Louvre expansion, and the building seems to rise from the chiselled, honey-hued mass that is the Grand Foyer. Cavernous, tungsten-lit and capped with a black onyx ceiling, the Grand Foyer is no less intimidating than a mausoleum, though certainly more lively.

That Pei had to abort the project due to lack of funding may have spelled the end of this architectural tale, had the building not been purchased in 1999 by Ty Warner of Beanie Babies fame. With boundless enthusiasm and a bank account to match, Warner dragged Pei out of retirement and furnished him with a carte blanche to realise his dream, which was to complete the top two floors, 51 and 52.

Flash forward to 2005 and the two Presidential Suites on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor are complete. A Steinway baby grand, games tables and cream-coloured credenzas earned Suite 5102 the name, “the Living Room”. You’d almost expect Rita Hayworth to pop out of the bedroom in a Givanchay dressing gown, sigh, and mix you both a Manhattan.

Suite 5101 plays the leading man, bellowing masculine sensibility amid a chorus of rich furnishings and oversized leather club chairs, a large fireplace, and a library that appears to have been selected by a Columbia University professor, full of beefy biographies, art books, and New York-centric reads.

Draw back the drapes and you see Pei’s thumbprint writ large in the form of a giant glass and metal window jutting out from the wall and framing all of Central Park, which spreads below like a very big back garden. At eye level are the MetLife Building and the Empire State Building. Suicidally far below, Madison Avenue runs its course through blocks of what look like Lego buildings. It’s a King Kong view.

But there’s one level to go, and that’s the Penthouse Suite on the 52<sup>nd</sup> floor, primed to open early this year. Twice as large as the Presidential Suites (and therefore twice as much: USD 30,000 a night), the Penthouse Suite will be the most expensive hotel room in New York. With 23-foot ceilings it’s the crown jewel of Pei’s pyramid. There’s that sound again – the buzz of a talking town.

Why a trio of suites this opulent and expensive needs to exist is beyond my imagination. But then again, I’m not an architect with a vision, nor am I an enthusiastic billionaire. Few of us are, and few of us will ever set foot on floors 51 or 52. And only some of us can afford the standard rooms at the Four Seasons New York, which are, admittedly, big and beautiful, and the nicest you may ever stay in. But some heights are within reach: anyone can walk into the opulent Grand Foyer, or head to Fifty Seven Fifty Seven for a Cosmo



*Opposite: One helluva view from the Four Seasons New York’s Presidential Suite, 5101; below: elegant design marks the hotel’s post-modern style.*

(perfected, I was told, at this very hotel). Anyone can go to Ty Lounge for afternoon tea, or, on a splurge-worthy occasion, to newly-opened L’Atelier de Joel Robuchon, the first New York outlet run by the eponymous Michelin-star chef. And if none of these is possible – well, there’re always the restrooms to consider, which, all things being equal, are also fabulous. Just ask Aunt Nicole. 🍷



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