

# Christmas shopping or January

London's Royal Lancaster Hotel is a hotel of constant surprises. Overlooking Hyde Park is an obvious advantage, but the views from both bedrooms and public rooms are much better than you would expect.



The outside entrance of the Island Restaurant and Bar

In terms of location, it has a central line station beneath the hotel, and Oxford street is a couple of stops one way, and the new Westfield with over 300 shops and restaurants under one roof is just four stops in the other direction. But perhaps the best surprise is the quality of the accommodation, restaurants, and above all the service. The Royal Lancaster scores top marks on so

many points that it gets our recommendation for readers wanting to take advantage of a great Euro/Pound exchange rate, the new lower VAT, the big discount sales and the low fares being offered especially from Faro during the low season of December and January (except for the holiday period). What better excuse could you need to for a weekend's shopping in London?

First impressions count for a lot, and the moment our taxi pulled up at the hotel entrance, the doorman opened the door with a friendly welcome and our bags were whisked away. The Royal Lancaster Hotel is "traditional" in the very best way, and you walk into reception over the thickest pile carpets I can remember, to a discrete reception. It's all wood, comfortable armchairs

and tasteful paintings, and there is no sign of gilt or glitter that so many modern hotels seem to rely on these days. Lighting is at exactly the right level, not too bright, and not too dim and the whole impression is of discreet luxury and good service.

There is a good range of room rates, and all the rooms are light and airy with large windows to enjoy the views, and all are fully equipped with all the facilities you would expect, including large en suite bathrooms with power showers, satellite TV etc. The higher the floor the larger the rooms and of course the room rate rises at the same time, though not unreasonably. You can request a floor level and a park or city view.

Our room was on the 18th floor, and these rooms are large and very comfortable with "picture" windows and some of the best views across London. The bathrooms are marble, and with large basins, and a really large traditional bath that you can stretch right out in. If you prefer a shower, it was good to see that the shower had its own separate heat and water strength controls; it wasn't just an extension off the bath tap. Towels are thick, large and plentiful, from large bath size right down to flannels, and all are monogrammed, a nice touch. Bath robes and slippers are also provided. There was a nice range of toiletries from Gilchrist and

Soames in a small basket by the basin. There was the inevitable hair dryer attached to the bathroom wall, but there was also a separate hair dryer in the room for those who don't like the fixed bathroom variety.

Strangely I couldn't find a shaver socket in the bathroom, but then almost everybody has rechargeable shavers these days.

A really nice and very unusual touch was that by the desk in the bedroom there was a range of sockets to accommodate British 3 pin plugs, continental European plugs, and even 110 volt American plugs. Whatever laptop or other device you have brought with you, like your phone charger, there was no need for a plug converter. The bedroom was large and spacious, with a settee and coffee table, a work desk, and a high quality flat screen TV with over 50 channels, and as far as I could see, in house movies were not charged for. The beds are firm and very comfortable with duvets and extra feather pillows on request.

Storage and hanging space was no problem, in fact it was gener-

ous, and a room safe was provided along with plentiful space to unpack your cases. Everything is very well thought out, spacious and very clean. Room service was impressive, with an evening turn-down service, and the maid never forgot to top up the tea and coffee etc, which is often overlooked until the morning in other establishments. Unfortunately the hotel provides mugs rather than cups and saucers, but that seems to be standard these days, and preferred by many guests.

Breakfast is served on the first floor in a modern dining room with superb views over the park and specifically the fountains at Kensington Gardens and the upper reaches of the Serpentine. We found a few minutes delay waiting to be seated each morning on the Saturday and Sunday, though on Sunday the hotel opened the Thai restaurant for breakfast as well. It wasn't a shortage of tables, simply the wait for seating. A nice touch was a table of coffee and tea and juices for you to drink while you waited to be seated, though there wasn't really time. A good range of cereals, yogurts,



The Nipa Thai Restaurant overlooking the park.

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# sales, the best London location



Island Restaurant Chef Jean-Claude Vydelingum

with a rather conservative choice of satay, but it was better than anything previously tried, and the sauces, both the traditional peanuts and a hot and spicy sauce were delightful, but go easy on the whole Chilli's, they are HOT!

For the main course we tried a traditional Thai green curry, probably the best I've ever tasted, and soft shell crabs in a light batter served on a Mango base. They was no way of telling if we were eating the 'soft shells', but they were very tasty, and something to be tried again. There was no room left for a desert! Service, as everywhere else in the hotel, was discreet and attentive, just as it should be.

On the Sunday evening we tried the Island Restaurant, which is full of surprises. As you walk in the modern décor is very impressive, soft lighting, good views out of the massive windows, black tables, beautifully laid (except for the rather doubtful plastic mats). The restaurant is on two levels, many of the tables enjoying views out over the Hyde Park Italian gardens. The cocktails are definitely worth starting your meal with, and we tried three varieties, and enjoyed them all. Our guest was a Sous Chef from a nearby two Michelin Star restaurant, brought along for his professional viewpoint on the food preparation. The first surprise came with the menu, which could best be described as

a "safe and reliable" choice of dishes for a hotel restaurant rather than more "exotic" dishes. The main courses on offer included Fish and Chips, a burger and, of course, steaks. However, Chef Jean-Claude Vydelingum had a few surprises up his sleeve. The proud boast on the menu outside the restaurant that said that they only use the finest ingredients available, proved to be no marketing man's exaggeration.

We chose a seafood plate, steamed Cornish mussels and a tiger prawn salad. The starter of Steamed Cornish Mussels was proclaimed to be the best ever tasted, and the delicious steamed coconut broth in which they were served promised to be of good strong Thai origin.

The seafood plate, which comprised of well seasoned salmon tartar, a fresh Oyster flavoured with soy sauce, which gave unexpected Asian twist and a delicately light crab mayonnaise with a warm scallop. The tiger prawn salad came with two pre-shelled prawns, cooked to perfection, on a wild rocket salad with roast red pepper, crostini and garlic mayonnaise. This was the least well presented of the three starters; the others could not be faulted for the way they had been plated.

For our main course we choose Beer battered sustainable Pollock and hand cut chips, grilled calves' liver with bacon and creamed potatoes and a sirloin steak. The



Entrance to the Royal Lancaster Hotel

cold cuts and other healthier breakfast options were available, or you can order a full English breakfast, eggs Benedict, omelettes or haddock. A very nice touch with the full English breakfast was that the baked beans were served in a separate dish on the plate, which stops them running all over the other ingredients. Service was attentive and helpful, though on Saturday the strain of so many guests did slow things down a bit.

The two main restaurants are the award winning Thai restaurant 'Nipa', one of only 15 Thai restaurants in the UK to have received a "Thai Select" award from the Thai government. Décor is really authentic, and most of the chefs are ladies, and clearly very skilled in the preparation of authentic Thai dishes. We started

choice of a sustainable fish as an alternative to overfished cod was encouraging to see. I had never tasted (or even heard of) Pollock, but it was very close to cod. Presentation of the dish was again excellent, and a green pea puree was perhaps a tongue in cheek tribute to mushy peas.

The grilled calves liver was perfectly cooked, pink inside, and the creamed potatoes tasted earthy and buttery, though they might perhaps have been a little smoother. The bacon was just a little over cooked for my taste, but again a very personal matter as many people like their bacon crispy. The steak was beautifully aged and cooked, and the béarnaise sauce had a classic flavour, and was also accompanied by a good mushroom red wine sauce.

By this time only two of us had the space to try the desert menu, a steamed apple and almond pudding, with blueberry ice cream and the other choice was butter milk pancakes. The pancakes were miniature and fluffy, the creamy chocolate mousse and honey comb cream providing balance with moreish quality. Despite the name, the steamed apple and almond pudding was delicate and superbly flavoured, and the ice cream clearly home-made.

What did our professional chef feel? He was impressed by the food and presentation and thought that "the chef is sitting on even more potential than he has shown as yet. The menu was safe and reliable and won't disappoint". This is a restaurant you can rely on for high standards and excellent ingredients with a good and affordable wine list. We tried the Chablis Laroche 2006, and the Valpolicella Classico

Bonacosta red, both excellent and very well priced.

The Royal Lancaster is a hotel we would have no hesitation in recommending. It's in the very heart of London shopping, yet peacefully located overlooking Hyde Park. Service is very attentive, yet never overbearing. The hotels rack rate starts at around £160+VAT per double room, per night at the weekend, but check

the hotel's website for the latest offers. (We found rates as low as £99 +VAT per room if you were booking at the last minute.) Normal weekend rates for a double room started at £149+VAT rising to £229+VAT for an executive, top floor room overlooking Hyde Park. Tel: 0044 20 7262 6737 or go online to: [www.royallancaster.com](http://www.royallancaster.com)

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