

August 2008

Where to stay

Reviews of the month Boston Cornwall Tokyo Bedfordshire **Plus** Suite talk



USA The Liberty Hotel, Boston

Reformed character

Harriet O'Brien stays at a former prison that changed its ways to become a glamorous hotel

Above, the entrance to The Liberty Hotel, a converted prison

WITHIN MONTHS OF LEAVING PRISON in Los Angeles, Paris Hilton was back in jail. This time the celeb cutie went cheerfully, and stayed in considerable style. For the prison in question is the most happening luxury hotel in Boston. The Liberty Hotel is in the city's old Charles Street Jail, an imposing granite building dating from 1851. With the addition of a new tower block, it opened as a centrally located (and wryly named) hotel in September last year. Checking in a few months later, I was following in the footsteps not only of Paris Hilton but also of Bill Clinton,

Meg Ryan and Morgan Freeman. If attracting celebrities is a barometer of success, the Liberty got off to a great start.

Other indicators were more immediate and obvious. I arrived on a Friday evening to find the place buzzing. Just through the main double-doors, a crush of people was waiting to get into Alibi, once the city's lock-up for drunks and now a hip bar. The doorman led me past the throng and up an escalator to the first-floor reception, which despite its awkward entry layout is the hub of the hotel. Here, glamorous people were >



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Left, the lobby (formerly a prisoners' exercise area) and, below, a hallway at The Liberty Hotel

book. The mini-bar is stocked with all the requisite components, from cane rum to peach Bellini mixers.

Over in the former jailhouse, just 18 rooms have been fashioned out of combinations of the old cells. The one I saw was larger and, of course, more idiosyncratic in shape than the rooms in the tower, although the decor was similar and there was little hint of the building's former incarnation. Staff cheerily assured me that Buddhist monks had conducted a cleansing ceremony all round the jail before it opened as a hotel.

Creating a happy party spirit at the Liberty has evidently been something of a mission, helped in no small part by its

The austerity of the four-storey-high lobby, the hub of the hotel, is softened by comfy furnishings and big prints of trees on the walls

> gathered around tables and at a long bar, drinking cocktails.

This large space, four storeys high and topped with chandelier-hung rafters, was the prison's indoor exercise area. Surrounded by walkways once patrolled by guards, it is starkly striking, the austerity partly softened by comfy furnishings and big prints of trees on the walls.

During the day, the natural light is dramatic: huge, arched windows extend over three floors of the lobby, and more light streams in from circular windows in the roof and from an elegant cupola. Architect Gridley James Fox Bryant designed the building for maximum sunlight and ventilation, and in its day it was considered an exemplary jail. However, 100 years on, overcrowding became a problem and in the early 1970s the US District Court condemned the prison. It did not, however, close until 1990. More than a decade later, work began on converting the building (the entire granite façade was temporarily removed to allow insulation to be added) and constructing the 16-storey block next door.

Most of the 298 bedrooms are in this new tower. Mine, 14 floors up, commanded terrific views over the Charles River and the Beacon Hill neighbourhood. Furnishings are in soothing browns and greys offset by dark-wood desks and headboards. Sassy elements include a door notice reading 'solitary' rather than 'do not disturb', and a cocktail shaker with accompanying recipe

open-door policy. Boston residents are encouraged to come and enjoy the hotel's two bars and two restaurants. Scampo opened in March and specialises in Italian cuisine; Clink is longer established and offers everything from bar snacks to sophisticated dishes such as wild sea bass with caper berries. It was bustling full and resounding with laughter on the night I was there. Cleverly converted from a series of cells, the restaurant retains much exposed brick and iron bars, and the staff wear shirts unobtrusively stencilled with old prison numbers. It's quirky, but not too kitsch.



THE LIBERTY HOTEL 215 CHARLES STREET, BEACON HILL, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, USA (00 1 617 224 4000; WWW.LIBERTYHOTEL.COM). DOUBLES FROM \$332

FOUR MORE PRISON HOTELS

MALMAISON OXFORD, UK

Part of 900-year-old Oxford Castle became a prison in the 19th century. This was converted into a 94-room hotel, below, in 2005. Doubles are fashioned from three cells knocked together, and there are suites in the hospital and governor's house. The buzzy basement brasserie has a modern British menu. 01865 268400; www.malmaison-oxford.com. Doubles from £160



FOUR SEASONS HOTEL ISTANBUL AT SULTANAHMET, TURKEY

Dissident writers and politicians were once locked up here. Today their exercise yard is a glamorous courtyard surrounded by 65 spacious, elegant rooms. Supremely stylish, the hotel is wonderfully located between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. 00 90 212 638 8200; www.fourseasons.com/istanbul. Doubles from €432

LOYD HOTEL, NETHERLANDS

UNDER £100 This former boarding house in Amsterdam's docklands became a prison during World War II. In 2004 it opened as a hotel and 'cultural embassy', with a public library as well as a large café. The 117 rooms range from one-star (with shared bathroom) to five-star luxury. 00 31 20 561 3604; www.lloydhotel.com. One-star doubles from €95; five-star from €315

BEST WESTERN PREMIER HOTEL KATAJANOKKA, FINLAND

UNDER £100 Look beyond the Best Western branding and this revamped 19th-century prison in Helsinki is a sleek property. It opened as a hotel in 2007. Most of the rooms have been created from two or three cells; three junior suites have private saunas. 00 358 9 686450; www.bwkatajanokka.fi. Doubles from €117