

# LIVING THE DREAM

English actor **Nick Hendrix** checks in to The St. Regis Downtown Dubai and traces the evolution of one of the world's most iconic hotel brands

WORDS NICK HENDRIX



## THE ST. REGIS DOWNTOWN DUBAI

In 1904, John Jacob Astor IV decided to build his second hotel, a sister hotel to his already iconic Waldorf-Astoria. The St. Regis New York was to be a modern hotel with each room exhibiting the heady heights of technology at the time – a telephone in every bedroom, no less. It was also the tallest hotel in New York City at the time and sparked a status battle between the Vanderbilt, Rockefeller and Astor families as they fought to be the most affluent family in Manhattan.

You wouldn't think there would be such an interesting connection between that and the 25-storey The St. Regis Downtown Dubai hotel I found myself staying in earlier this year. Hotel brands love to advertise their history and their heritage and although the St. Regis name has been passed around a few different conglomerates since its Astor days, it was right there at the beginning of the modern era of luxury hospitality. So, to be here in Dubai, probably the most globally renowned centre of luxury hospitality in the 21st century, feels like a fitting narrative.

St. Regis has two hotels in the city – the second is on the Palm Jumeirah – whilst this one is located within a strong stone's throw from the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa. Just like Astor jostled with Vanderbilt across the road, the St. Regis in Downtown Dubai is surrounded by other brands like Armani, Pullman and Radisson.

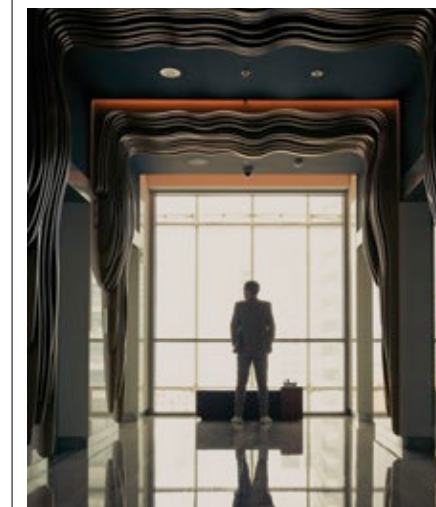
I found myself in town to review this impressive hotel as well as take the stunning McLaren GT for a thrash through the desert landscape. The physical toll that driving a supercar to well near its limit, not to mention getting in and out of something that is essentially lying prostrate on the tarmac, is quite substantial – so a suitably inviting, restful and comfortable suite waiting for you at the end of the day is paramount. And with that in mind, The St. Regis Downtown Dubai didn't disappoint.

Hospitality is something that Dubai does better than most – when a city's trademark is tourism and hotels are its landmarks, then there can be no second prize, no points for effort. It's got to be great.

What this St. Regis does is to give you all that you hope for from a Dubai experience whilst holding onto its hat. St. Regis is a brand with history and therefore experience (not to mention that its parent

company Marriott is an expert in the hotel business). There are some mind-blowing buildings in Dubai and some staggering displays of wealth – it must be hard to create anything and then a struggle to figure out how to stand out. This hotel, however, has an understated class to it, the finishes are excellent, the service exemplary and the styling lavish without being grotesque.

The 298-room tower sits proudly within Business Bay. At the moment, St. Regis stands out with little competition in immediate view. It's clear to see that is an area that is buzzing – with Dubai Mall sitting below the Burj Khalifa within easy reach, it is an area



only on the up. There is a strange quality to Dubai where it's hard to see where the centre of it is. Is it the Creek or the old trading centre? Is it the Marina, the almost Miami-esque collection of towers, or is it right here in Downtown? The Burj Khalifa feels like a natural anchor at its core.

Two key elements of any luxury hotel are its restaurant and its leisure facilities. Does the food make you want to stay in rather than go out? Are you thinking about what to gorge on at the breakfast buffet spread? Can you while away hours by the hotel pool? Is the gym well equipped? All important questions that I interrogated with glee.

Dubai is a culinary smorgasbord, so staying in isn't always the best option. But should you choose to do so, you won't be disappointed. The delicious Italian restaurant Basta! on the ground floor is a delight. There's an international feel to the place and St. Regis finds a great balance with this space.

It honours its international guests with a well-crafted European food culture, whilst also paying homage to the Emirati history of gold souks and the desert culture through its styling cues and artwork.

As for the leisure facilities, they don't disappoint either. The gym is a decent size for a hotel and has a good selection of kit, plus plenty of floor space – in my experience, these are the things that tend to get lost as developers are keen to maximise square footage. The spa is well appointed and offers all you'd ever need in an environment that both calms and pampers.

It's the pool that I was particularly fond of as it is partially covered. I feel like Michael McIntyre described Dubai's heat best when he said it was like that rush of hot air you get when you open the oven – and he's not far off in its description when it comes to the weather for a few months every year in Dubai. Because of this scorching reality, I find that a poolside umbrella doesn't quite cut it – even the shade here still requires a bit of factor 30. So, by building a pool that slips itself half under the actual building you are afforded a feeling of almost being indoors rather than just 'in the shade'. The ceiling is high allowing plenty of waterside breeze to blow in and it means that should you want to sit at one of the tables around the bar for a spot of lunch, you can do so without fearing a heatstroke. Of course, should you want a proper blasting from the sun, there are sun loungers aplenty. The wonderful bar staff there are happy to accommodate any request, and the food comes up from the restaurant kitchen, so it is the same standard as that found in the hotel's main restaurants.

The question is, if Astor was still around and took a stroll along the canal-side promenade and happened upon the towering St. Regis Downtown, how would he feel? Would he be proud of where his legacy has got to? I think he would. This hotel is well located to feel present and connected, whilst remaining an early player in the ever-busy hotel game. The way it's put together, what it offers and how it's all delivered would appeal to his dream of being at the forefront of the industry. He'd be glad that the bar serves a pretty mean Bloody Mary, which was invented at his New York hotel over a century ago, and he'd be happy to know that what he started has continued – every room does have its own telephone. **BT**