

Hotel insider | Washington’s infamous Watergate Hotel has reopened after nine years and a \$125m revamp. By *Kate Salter*

On the banks of the wide Potomac River in Washington DC stands what is arguably the city’s second most famous building. The Watergate complex — a hotel, three apartment buildings and two office blocks — may not attract the same throngs of tourists as the White House but it is probably as ingrained in the nation’s consciousness. Last month the Watergate Hotel — where the burglars stayed before the 1972 break-in which ultimately led to Nixon’s resignation — reopened after nine years and a \$125m refurbishment. The revamped hotel boasts interiors by Ron Arad, the influential Israeli architect and designer, staff uniforms by *Mad Men* costume designer Janie Bryant and food from Michael Santoro, one of the country’s rising culinary stars. Before it became synonymous with political skulduggery, the Watergate complex represented something else. The opening of Italian architect Luigi Moretti’s pale concrete behemoth in 1965 signalled the arrival of a sophisticated, modern, European vision of how one could live. The complex — the city’s first mixed-use development — had shops, doctors’ and dentists’ surgeries, sculpted swimming pools, landscaped gardens and apartments with balconies overlooking the river. The bathrooms even had bidets. It was so far removed from the city’s staid, neoclassical architecture that it must have looked as if a UFO had landed (The Washington Post’s critic described it as being as

“The scandal was free advertising — every time there was a report on TV they’d show the hotel”

appropriate “as a strip dancer performing at your grandmother’s funeral.”) It was a place that attracted the political elite. Members of Richard Nixon’s cabinet lived here, including attorney-general John Mitchell, who was later jailed for his role in the scandal. Politicians from the Reagan and Bush administrations made it their home too, including Condoleezza Rice. Monica Lewinsky came here to stay in her mother’s apartment after her affair with Bill Clinton went public. The hotel opened in 1967, two years after the first apartments, and was quickly populated by politicians, lobbyists and celebrities — from Alan Greenspan to Liberace. Susan Cooper, who grew up in the city and now lives in a Watergate apartment, spent her wedding night there in 1979. “My mother organised the wedding and there was no question that the cake was going to come from the Watergate pastry shop. At the time it was the most glamorous hotel in Washington. I shouldn’t really admit this but we took an ashtray as a souvenir because it had the word ‘Watergate’ on it.” The security guard gives a tired smile as I walk up the steps to the 11-storey building at 2600 Virginia Avenue, one of the Watergate’s office blocks. Yes, he says, this is the building which used to house the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee — the offices broken into in 1972 so phones could be



No need to break in



tapped. He points across the street to a muddy coloured block, now halls of residence for George Washington University. “And that’s where the crooks listened to the wire taps. It used to be a motel called the Howard Johnson.” The office building is attached to the hotel, where the burglars booked rooms 214 and 314 and ate lobster in the restaurant the night before a second break-in, needed to carry out repairs to the bugs. The burglary was foiled when a security

From top: the Watergate Hotel from outside; the whisky bar; the hotel’s reception area
Top right: the dining room

guard noticed doors in the office building had been taped open. The police were called and five men were caught inside with large amounts of cash, cameras and bugging equipment. The men were eventually exposed as being on the payroll of Nixon’s re-election campaign and the money trail led all the way to the president. Yet rather than damage the hotel’s reputation, the scandal was good for business. “Many Washingtonians had heard of the Watergate complex being built, but did not know that there was also a hotel,” says Ursula Beyer, who worked at the hotel as assistant manager from 1969 until 1989. “So in many ways, the break-in put the Watergate Hotel on the map. It created more business in the short term but it also attracted a lot of lunatics. I remember a little old man, carrying a beat-up suitcase, showing up one late evening wanting to speak to President Nixon.” Giuseppe Cecchi was the original project manager for the Watergate complex. As a young engineer working for Italian real estate developer Società Generale Immobiliare (SGI), Cecchi was sent to Washington to find land ripe for investment. SGI paid \$10m for a 10-acre site on what was then an unprepossessing industrial zone called Foggy Bottom. The final apartment block was completed the year before the break-in. “The scandal was free advertising,” Cecchi tells me by phone. “Every time there was a report about it on TV, they’d show a picture of the hotel or the complex. A lot of tourists came.” So many of the hotel’s embossed towels and bathrobes went missing, he says, that they had to replace them with plain ones. In the 1970s the hotel had another publicity boost when chef Jean Louis-Palladin — then the youngest chef to

have been awarded two Michelin stars — arrived from France to set up his eponymous restaurant. After a stellar reign, he was fired in 1996, apparently for womanising, drinking and frequent absences. The restaurant closed and the hotel began to decline. In the late 1990s and early 2000s various deals to sell the hotel collapsed and by 2007 it stood empty. “When the hotel finally closed, there was a collective gasp across Washington,” says one of the waiters in Kingbird, the new hotel’s restaurant. “We just couldn’t believe it.” Every morning and evening two elderly women appear beneath my hotel balcony to swim stuttering laps of the apartment residents’ pool. There is hardly anyone around, certainly no one who looks under 50. The gardens are a lush green, the river glints in the distance, there is space and light. But it also feels that time has stood still here. In the shopping arcade that used to house Gucci, Valentino, Vera Wang and Yves Saint Laurent, almost every other shop window has a For Lease sign. Claudia Buttaro-Pfeffer owns the Watergate Salon and Day Spa, still on the same spot as when her parents opened it in 1966. “It’s not a modern place,” she says apologetically as she shows me around. There are faded signed photos of famous clients — Cher, Madonna, Jane Seymour, Richard Burton — nearly all of whom stayed at the hotel. Prince once asked her to do the hair of his whole entourage at 2am (she said no). “It’s been tough,” she tells me. High rents, low foot traffic, and the closing of the Safeway supermarket and the boutiques means that business is slow. “My father told me that the scandal changed everything. Things were ticking along when suddenly it was like, boom. Now,

not so much. The original residents are all old now and are either moving into retirement homes or dying. I hope the hotel can bring some life back.” The hotel’s new owners, Jacques and Rakel Cohen of Euro Capital Properties, who bought it in 2010 for \$45m, say they “immediately saw the potential to return the hotel to a state worthy of its reputation as Washington’s finest address”. They know that the scandal is their most powerful marketing tool and are enthusiastically milking it: the telephone reservation line ends in 1972, the room keys say “No need to break in” and pens are inscribed with “I stole this from the Watergate Hotel”. There are plans to play extracts from Nixon’s speeches in the toilets. Even the name of the hotel is written in a version of the typewriter font used in the Senate Watergate Committee case documents. Aside from American history buffs, the new owners want the hotel to appeal



to a younger, design-conscious crowd — the kind of “hip” people that Buttaro-Pfeffer says the complex needs to attract. The hotel’s 336 bedrooms, designed by BBGM, have a masculine, mid-century corporate feel (and with rates starting at about \$500, it may be businessmen rather than young hipsters who can afford to stay here). Later this summer a spa is due to open, along with a rooftop bar and Michael Santoro’s fine dining restaurant. The main public areas designed by Ron Arad — lobby, whisky bar and restaurants — are bold and brilliantly bankers, something you might expect in New York or Miami, not Washington, where smart hotels usually come with sumptuous drapes and thick beige carpets. The reception desk is a 22-metre-long wall of patinated brass tubes, the restaurant has gigantic polished stainless steel “tree columns” with branches that splay out to meet a black polished plaster ceiling. The whisky bar, whose spiralling walls are made from thousands of illuminated bottles, has people reaching for their iPhone cameras. These shining, intricate metal structures are the handiwork of fabricator Roberto Travaglia — like Moretti, the complex’s original architect, an Italian. “With Ron Arad’s studio there are never easy or banal projects,” he tells me, “and every time they come up with something more difficult.” Risë Birnbaum has lived in the Watergate complex for 10 years. She tells me she thinks the new hotel will “recharge the batteries and bring a new energy and dynamism to the neighbourhood”, though it will never shake off its association with that night in June 1972. “It might not be our finest moment, but it will always be part of the fabric of the building,” she says.

i / DETAILS

Kate Salter was a guest of the Watergate Hotel (thewatergatehotel.com). ‘Superior King’ rooms usually cost from \$540 per night, though promotional rates may also be available

POSTCARD FROM ...
NORTHERN CHINA

i / DETAILS

China Southern Airlines (csair.com) flies from Harbin to Mohe City. Jennifer Thompson stayed at the Golden Horse Hotel in Mohe City which can be booked via English-language websites hotelsone.com and chinahotels.net

Mohe, the northernmost county in China, is remote and inhospitable, its vast forests home to bears and wolves. In winter, temperatures regularly drop below minus 50C. And yet every summer, thousands of tourists jump in SUVs and private taxis to make a pilgrimage to Mohe’s most northerly settlement, the village of Beijicun. They come to peer at Russia across the Amur River (whose Chinese name Heilong Jiang, or Black Dragon River, gives the province its name), as well as to brag that they have stood at the very top of the country, and above all, to try to catch a glimpse of the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights. My own trip was inspired in an Icelandic museum where I had learned that it was possible to see the lights in China, although it quickly became apparent that the chances of doing so are rare. You could spend several decades in Mohe and only see them a handful of times, according to locals. But the slim odds haven’t prevented the village of Beijicun from declaring June 21, the summer solstice, to be its “Northern Lights festival”. Reaching Beijicun takes about an hour by road from Mohe City; getting to Mohe City from Harbin, capital of



Heilongjiang province, takes about 20 hours by train — though, thankfully, a recently launched air route cuts this to 90 minutes. As I set out on the road north from Mohe City the forest thickened and the hills steepened until we reached a wooded glade peppered with local Communist party officials there for the occasion. An unremarkable sleepy hamlet for most of the year, Beijicun had set up a ticketed entry point in the sort of Alpine-style cabin Heidi might have lived in; the Post Office even had a Christmas tree. Nobody seemed to quite agree on what constitutes China’s northernmost patch of land, with several spots around the village

attracting tourists for the obligatory selfie. Perhaps the Amur’s exposed beaches of shingle lay the best claim, with the river in low ebb now that the last of winter’s snowfall has gone. For the lone foreigner the festival offered a fascinating glimpse into the rapid development of China’s domestic tourist industry. “Hobbyist” travellers — those with a serious interest in photography or cycling — were abundant, with scores biking up from Mohe City. Others were relishing the chance to stretch their legs on hikes alongside the river, enjoying some of the freshest air available anywhere in China — a genuine attraction in a country whose major cities are plagued by terrible air quality. Beijicun is clearly pinning its hopes on a continued stream of visitors: two wooden guesthouses are sprouting up everywhere, and glossy brochures in local hotels advertise timber-frame houses for sale for those who want the ultimate rural retreat. Back in Mohe City, the authorities were taking no chances: Mother Nature might not have obliged with a natural light show but there was a spectacular fireworks display instead — even if the long hours of sunshine this far north diminish their impact. The wide boulevards suggest a

misplaced civic grandiosity but they also point to a tragic past. Largely destroyed by fire in 1987, the entire town was rebuilt in a grand imperial Russian style. Even the airport looks like something out of a Tolstoy novel, with cupolas, arched windows and golden lettering. But the surrounding forest is never kept entirely at bay. The woodlands that have been allowed to remain as parks between Mohe City’s neighbourhoods evoke of the enveloping darkness of a Brothers Grimm fairytale. Statues of goldpanners celebrate the region’s brief mining boom at the close of the 19th century, a rush that attracted speculators from Russia, Japan and Korea. Russia’s influence lingers visibly: *matryoshka* dolls and Russian chocolate are prominently displayed in tourist stores, alongside furs and dried mushrooms, a speciality of the region. Returning to the attractive airport for the flight south, visitors lingered on the runway to pose for photos, to soak up another stunningly bright day and to celebrate their journey to China’s far north. Jennifer Thompson Jennifer Thompson is a Hong Kong-based reporter for the FT

Tourists come to peer at Russia across the Amur River and, above all, to try to catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights