



[CHECK OUT]

LIVING WITH AN ART BIAS

There's just one Roger Smith left with its original name in New York City. And the hotel oozes art from every corner, even the bar that doubles up as a gallery, finds **Charukesi Ramadurai**

So, I was to stay at a business hotel in midtown Manhattan? You will excuse me for expecting a glass-and-chrome place with polite but impersonal service, and standard-issue rooms slightly larger than the proverbial matchbox.

And if that were indeed the case, I would still have forgiven Roger Smith and checked in happily, given the location. Because, if you, like I, believe that location is everything in the hotels business, then Roger Smith wins hands down: bang in the middle of Lexington Avenue. I walked pretty much everywhere, refusing to spend on a subway pass my first couple of days in the city.

Grand Central? Next door. Times Square? A few blocks away. Broadway? Practically next to the Square. The

Empire State Building? Central Park? You get the drift.

And as it happens, a small room was not the case (you knew where I was headed with this, didn't you?). My room turned out to be a suite, with an elegant white and brown motif, but not minimalistic in the way their sleek and white website suggested.

Think wallpaper in subdued floral motifs, four-poster beds, antique chest of drawers, vintage American prints on the walls, wrought iron dining table and chairs, live plants, and biographies and coffee-table tomes lining bookshelves above an inviting study table. My suite also came with a kitchenette fitted out with a microwave, a mini fridge and an espresso machine.

From a quick tour of the hotel, I got the impression that no two rooms are alike

No two rooms in the hotel have the same décor although each one is inviting and cosy with ample sunlight and space

in décor or layout, although all of them manage to convey a sense of space and sunlight. I was particularly intrigued by the three small Market Spaces within the hotel building, which were open for quirky pop-up stores.

Roger Smith is of that rare breed of family-owned and managed hotels. It has existed in the same spot since 1929, part of a small chain of hotels in the tri-state area (one of them even boasts of hosting Scott Fitzgerald and, later, John F. Kennedy during his campaign trail). Today, this is the only hotel still carrying the Roger Smith name, the others having disappeared under different managements or having died

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natural deaths over time.

In 1988, artist James Knowles and his wife Suzanne took over Roger Smith and turned it into the quirky boutique hotel it currently is. Soon after he assumed ownership, Knowles said in an interview to the *New York Times*, “I like to call it a hotel with an art bias.”

Sure enough, as artist-in-residence, Knowles’ presence is felt everywhere in the hotel, from the bronze statues off the lobby to the bold paintings that hang on the walls of the ground floor.

In fact, Lily’s, the bar at lobby level, doubles up as art gallery (and occasional event space for book readings and workshops), providing a welcome space for young and upcoming artists. And while the hotel does not have formal restaurants, Lily’s offers quick bites to go with the drinks. It is more of a lounge space with red walls and black leather bar stools, and a giant glass window looking out on to the

buzz of Lexington Avenue.

In true New York style, breakfast is on the go, with apples, muesli and flavoured Green Mountain yoghurt—all the way from Vermont, they say—available through the day at the lobby to “guests and their friends”. And, in the course of my stay, I noticed that the lobby and Lily’s together seemed to draw in small groups of people at all times for personal and professional rendezvous.

The highlight, though, is the 16th-floor rooftop Henry’s Bar (open only April to October), with its cosy vibe, exposed brick walls and great views of the Manhattan skyline; impressive any time of the day but particularly dazzling at night, when the city lights have come on.

I walked to the food hall at Grand Central Terminal for breakfast one morning and another day, at lunchtime, queued up at one of the bustling food

Henry’s Bar on the rooftop offers a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline, especially at night when the city lights come on

trucks on 47th (feeling like quite the stylish New Yorker myself for a few brief minutes).

At the end of my stay, I checked their website once more, and I spotted this claim right at the bottom of the home page, “Roger Smith is an idea.” Yes, a very good idea, I think. 

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION 47th Street and Lexington Avenue, New York City; 26km from JFK International Airport; 29km from Newark Liberty International Airport; 600m from Grand Central Terminus

ACCOMMODATION 132 rooms and suites

TARIFF From \$250 plus taxes (depending on the season).

CONTACT +1-212-755-1400, rogersmith.com