

Travel Tales

Live the London Club Life

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

What do these disparate famous fictional and real people have in common: James Bond, M, Auric Goldfinger, Mycroft Holmes, Phileas Fogg, Bertie Wooster, Gwyneth Paltrow, H.G. Wells, Prince Phillip, Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Claus von Bulow, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and the Duke of Wellington? They all are or were members of London clubs, storied in fact and fiction. Many of these clubs are just as interesting, historic and beautiful as the Houses of Parliament, St. Paul's, and other major London landmarks.

It used to be that it was impossible for us “colonials” to enter, much less stay at, these rarified clubs. But that is changing. Let me give you a brief tour, describing a few of the clubs I have stayed at, some of their quirks, and how you can literally “join the club.”

The Carleton Club is a temple to the Conservative Party. It is in a deceptively standard looking Georgian building at 69 St. James Street, but then surprises with a gorgeous interior space featuring dramatic curving stairs, topped by an amazing large dome that is invisible from the street. The highlight of the Club's art collection is a portrait of the Queen Mother, with her signature on the nearby register. The Club is in an excellent location just a few hundred yards from St. James Palace, and very close to terrific boutique shops on Jermyn Street. The Club was founded in 1832 and was bombed in World War II by the Luftwaffe, and again in 1990 by the IRA. Distinguished Club members have included Winston Churchill and Lord Randolph Churchill, Benjamin Disraeli, Rudyard Kipling and Margaret Thatcher, and many other British Prime Ministers. Mrs. Thatcher had to be made an “honorary man” in order to enter the men's only bar.

In September 2010 we stayed at the Carleton Club in a long narrow bedroom that had not been refurbished for many years, en suite with twin beds and air conditioning (AC), for 145 pounds including VAT (value added tax) and full breakfast. This was the weekend discount rate; the cost was 195 pounds during the week.

The Reform Club is the opposite of the Carleton Club—it is a beautiful paean to political and social reform. It is located at 104 Pall Mall, and was built in 1841 by Charles Barry, who was inspired by Michelangelo's Palazzo Farnese. Original members had to swear allegiance to the Great Reform Act of 1832, hence the name. Famous members have included Winston Churchill (yes, he switched back and forth!), Henry James, Arthur

Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells, and Prime Minister William Gladstone. His famous (and very small) “Gladstone bag” was on display when we stayed at the Club in September 2010. Another famous but fictional member was the fabulous Phileas Fogg, who made his wager in the Reform Club that he could depart the Club and go “Around the World in 80 Days” – and did. The magnificent public rooms include a library with 75,000 volumes, a 120-foot long dining room, card room, billiard room, and a “silence only” study and writing room.

Our bedroom was quite large, about 16 x 16 feet, en suite, attractive and refurbished but with no AC. The rate was 195 pounds including VAT during the week with full breakfast, with a 20 to 15 percent reduction on weekends, and no breakfast service on Sundays.

Other clubs we have stayed at or visited include: the Caledonian Club in Belgravia, good rehabbed rooms at a reasonable rate; the Lansdowne Club in Mayfair, modern bedrooms and an historic public room where Ben Franklin negotiated the treaty which ended the Revolution and gave the US independence; the Royal Automobile Club in Pall Mall, surprisingly the most magnificent club in London; and the Travellers Club in Pall Mall, with members including five British Prime ministers, Talleyrand, Prince Phillip and the Prince of Wales. There are about 60 active clubs in London (see Wikipedia.org’s “list of London’s gentlemen’s clubs”), so I have barely scratched the surface.

Some of the most amusing clubs are fictional. The Blades Club is the exclusive gambling and gourmet club frequented by James Bond, his boss M, and his nemesis Goldfinger. It is modeled on the real Boodle’s, of which Ian Fleming was a member. The Diogenes Club is the home of Mycroft Holmes, genius brother of Sherlock Holmes. The main rule in this Club is no talking or communications of any kind– three violations and you are expelled. One of the most famous fictional clubs is the Drone’s Club – hangout of Bertie Wooster and his man Jeeves. This club created by the whimsy of P.G. Wodehouse was based loosely on the Bachelor’s Club and Bucks Club, and features members with delightful names like Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps and Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright. Club activities include drinking, getting engaged and un-engaged to numerous young ladies, and staging the annual Fat Uncle Contest.

Clubs are almost by definition a bit quirky. One quirk is usually dress – almost all require jacket and tie in all or certain public rooms. A few like the Lansdowne Club are “business casual,” but this is unusual. All ban the wearing of jeans, and some bar jodhpurs, a great hardship. Women can usually get away with pantsuits, but dresses or suits with skirts are generally preferred.

Another quirk is the bedrooms. Most clubs have sensational public rooms, with gorgeous architecture, décor and paintings, but the bedrooms are often small, un-rehabbed, with no AC. This is because these clubs started out as gentlemen’s clubs, where single men could collapse upstairs after a hard night of gambling and carousing. Large, comfortable bedrooms with separate bathrooms were unnecessary. Always enquire carefully.

Clubs are usually designed to serve members during the week. Hence services (and prices) usually go down on weekends. Food at clubs is usually fabulous at breakfast but less so at lunch and dinner (this is England, you know). The best meals we have found are at the Caledonian, and the cheapest at the Travellers (dinner entrees only 9 to 10 pounds between 6 and 7 pm).

Many clubs have only allowed women as members in recent years, some still do not allow them as members or even inside at all, and some have certain rooms reserved for men only. Quirky or annoying? – take your pick.

The final quirk is, you need to have your club fax a “letter of introduction” to the London club, in order to stay, visit or dine. That brings us to the key question, how to get in?

If you are a member of a city, golf, university, alumni, country, yacht, military or other club, enquire if it has a “reciprocal network” of clubs. Such reciprocal networks give you the privilege of staying and visiting other clubs in the network.

If that fails, you can always join a local club that has a reciprocal network. See the Wikipedia.org “list of American gentlemen’s clubs,” with over 235 listings. Most of these admit women, and many have reciprocal networks with clubs in London and elsewhere around the world.

If you would rather have your very own London club, consider joining the Royal Overseas League, or ROSL, a non-profit organization with extensive arts, social, charitable, music and welfare activities. This organization of 18,000 members worldwide was founded in 1910. It has a large clubhouse in the St. James section of London facing Green Park, with 80 modern bedrooms renting to members at rates lower than a comparable hotel in downtown London. For example, a double en suite costs from 165 to 185 pounds including VAT and continental breakfast. The Patron of the Club is Queen Elizabeth II.

Benefits include access to the ROSL clubhouses in London and Edinburgh, and numerous events, among them: church service at Westminster Abbey attended by the Queen, tours of Buckingham Palace garden and the Houses of Parliament, tea in the House of Lords, and a chance at tickets to the Chelsea Flower Show, Trooping the Colour, and Wimbledon. Membership for overseas (non-UK) residents is a modest 112 pounds per year with a 59 pound, one-time, joining fee. The ROSL has 80 reciprocal clubs around the world, including nine in the US. For information see www.rosl.org.uk or contact ROSL, St. James St., London SW1A 1LR, 44 (0) 20 7499 6738.

Of if you prefer, you can join one of the more exclusive London clubs. These often have rates that are much lower for overseas members than for London residents. The Lansdowne Club would probably welcome foreign inquiries, and this club has a huge list of 250 reciprocals. The overseas rate for a retired couple is 440 pounds for the entrance fee and 225 for annual membership.

Enjoy the club life – perhaps you too will become famous in fact and fiction!

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Lew Toulmin is a member of the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, which has a reciprocal network of over 100 clubs including 16 in London. He lives in Silver Spring.

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Photo captions (all credits to Lew Toulmin):

1. Our Carleton Club 1950s style bedroom.
2. Exterior of the Carleton Club, St. James Street, London.
3. Magnificent stairs in the Carleton Club. Often used for weddings.
4. The Royal Over-Seas League clubhouse in London.

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