

That Capital Mansion on 'O'

Little do Washingtonians suspect that in their midst sits one phantasmagoric B&B. BY JAYNE WISE

Know this: The Mansion on O Street is a B&B unlike any you've ever come across. Know this, too: Minimalism has no place here. Objects and artworks—antique puppets, Western cow-horn chairs, costume jewelry, abstract lithographs—fill every possible surface, corner, cranny, crevice. Finally, know this: The Mansion on O Street will upend your fondest conventional notions, mess with your

aesthetic sensibilities, and leave its impression on you long after your stay.

SETTING

Unremarkable. By design. Three bosomy town houses joined into a sprawling whole, the mansion holds discreet court on a residential block of O Street in Washington, DC. (You'll need to hunt out its name plaques; safe to say that 99 percent of Washingtonians don't know this place exists.) The mansion is a chummy ten blocks from the White House, and a 40-minute power walk (this is DC) to the Capitol—one of whose architects, Alan Clark, designed the house in 1892 for his brother Champ Clark, who would become Speaker of the House during Teddy Roosevelt's Presidency.

FIRST IMPRESSION

A glorious, antic unspooling of rooms, hallways, niches, staircases. A reigning



Scenes from a mansion: the popular Log Cabin Room (top); sitting pretty in the Russian Tea Room (right); an antique roadster (bottom).

sensibility that confidently pairs angels and a wallful of boutique whiskies, Remington bronzes with dime-store dinosaurs, Maurice Sendak fables with Henry Kissinger tomes. In the words of one guest, "Gentleman's Club to haute bordello, there's a room here for every conceit." In the words of another guest, "Who needs Alice's Wonderland?"

TELLING DETAILS

Secret doors. A mirrored stairway that leads—nowhere. A huge cuckoo clock here, an authentic Tiffany window there. Sixteen fireplaces. A cheeky wood gnome forever holding his nose in one of the 28 (count 'em) bathrooms.

Oh, and everything, *everything* is for sale. One of those bathrooms tickle your fancy? Buy it and take it home—Jacuzzi, toilet paper, and all. At least one guest did just that—bought an entire guest room, "though he left us the walls," grins H. H. Leonards, the Mansion's creator and guiding spirit. Disruptive? Not to this unorthodox thinker. "To possess things is to have your soul die. I believe that things create images and memories, which bring us back to who we are and nudge us toward who we could become. All these objects evoked responses in me and I want them to evoke responses in our guests. When guests buy an object, they participate in the experience of being here. And they create a space for a new object, which keeps the mansion in a perpetual state of creative process."

ROOMS

What constitutes a room is, like so much else here, a matter of some whimsy: A handful of the bathrooms qualify as old-fashioned WCs, and some of the ten kitchenettes—distributed among the floors, for guests and business gatherings—are nook-ish in scale.

A purposeful whimsy informs each of the guest rooms—which come in a variety of room combinations, depending

on the guests' needs—from the drum-beat Safari Room, to the psychedelic Fifth Dimension Suite (with its ghosts of Afros past), to the Midshipman's Room, curtains crisply arranged like signal flags, to the Corporate Suite, with an artfully state-of-the-art office—and a bed impressively headboarded with filing cabinets.

One of the most requested rooms is

cats), large-screen TV, and a burbling aquarium above the bed.

NAVIGATION TIP

A compass may be overdoing it, but do make mental note of major "hallmarks" when wandering the mansion's skein of hallways. It took me 20 minutes to find the breakfast room for my a.m. coffee.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

"See the glittery sheen on this wall?" A Mansion staffer is giving me an informal tour. "It was a difficult effect to achieve, but H. (Leonards' familiar name) knew what she wanted and held fast until she got it." Leonards concedes, "I have such a powerful sense of how something should look that I don't have a choice but to see it realized. I set the stage as I see it, then let things happen."

Happen they do. Her stage has attracted such star powers as Sylvester Stallone, Carly Simon, Antonio Banderas, Melanie Griffith, Alec Baldwin, and Kim Basinger.



Orientalist touches flavor the Octagon Room (top). You'll find no two of the many bathrooms—here in the Log Cabin Room—alike.

the Log Cabin Room, which, though pricey, includes a jazzy sauna-Jacuzzi that can simulate a rain forest (once you figure out the control panel), a loft with full kitchen (microwave, stove, dishwasher; complimentary beverages and

THE BUZZ

The Mansion's a word-of-mouth place, not listed in guidebooks and not advertised. Glance at the autographed photos and it's clear the word's getting around: Uber-Democrat Hillary Clinton and uber-Republican Bob Barr both left their John Hancocks. The mansion hosted a dinner for Civil Rights icon Rosa Parks, and a sweet 16th do for Chelsea Clinton. Which brings us to the Mansion's other nonprofit roles: It's a membership club "for people wanting to effect creative change," and a museum open for tours.

NUMBERS

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