

The Raffles Story: Back to the Grand Old Lady of Singapore

The second of a three-part traveller's tale written by bestselling travel authors Brigid Keenan and Claudia Waddams, and illustrated by British artist and interior designer Luke Edward Hall



A doorman at the entrance to Raffles Singapore, as imagined by Luke Edward Hall

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The publisher Borys Emil Conrad had had an exceptionally challenging week. He missed his wife and his two young daughters and longed for home. It had been an intense period of travel and he was weary of the wrinkled shirts, the generic hotel rooms, the banality of it all; he was no longer even surprised that he could be in Bangkok one day and Beijing the next and not notice a difference between the two. But now he was on his own time and making a long-overdue stop on his way home.

His heart rose as the hotel's Bentley swept around the elegant curved drive and stopped smartly in front of the low, wide marble stairs that led up to the distinctive veranda, its awning held up by slim pillars. A hundred window panes winked at him joyously from the iconic colonial façade of the building, flashing their greeting. He paused to drink it all in, murmuring under his breath, "Raffles, providing legendary service since 1887".



Borys is escorted down an outdoor corridor by a Raffles Singapore employee, as imagined by Luke Edward Hall

A turbaned, liveried doorman, watching from the shaded porch, stepped forward to meet the car, his starched white uniform pristine in the bright tropical sun. The palm trees that framed the hotel reached upwards like graceful dancing ladies, their lush fronds gently brushing the neat terracotta tiled roofs. It had been a great many years.

"Mr Conrad?" the doorman said hesitatingly as he opened the car door. "Is it you?"

Borys clasped the Sikh's hand in his own and smiled gently. "It is me, I am back," and then he tipped his head and gave a full-bodied laugh. "It's good to be home!"

Borys followed his bags over the threshold of Raffles Hotel and into the airy, all-white foyer (it was like a birdcage). His shoulders began to drop as he raised his eyes up to the stacked colonnades with their Corinthian columns and open walkways flooded with natural light. "It remains the most perfect oasis," he thought with wonder, "right in the middle of one of the most thrumming cities in the world."



The Long Bar, Raffles Singapore, as imagined by Luke Edward Hall

He turned around on the spot, very slowly, euphoria spreading across his chest. The Grand Old Lady of Singapore was exactly as he remembered her... He caught the eye of an upright older man who was watching his arrival with curiosity and amusement from the comfort of a straight-backed armchair, discreetly placed at the edge of the room, and grinned conspiratorially.

"Mr Conrad?" – the concierge approached him mid-turn. "Welcome, we've been expecting you. Allow me to show you to your room... Your family room." She bobbed her head slightly, pleased to have made the connection.



The new Raffles Warsaw Europejski Hotel at night, as imagined by Luke Edward Hall

Their footsteps rang out on the white marble floor as she led him through the hall and out onto one of the curved pathways that skirted The Lawn, weaving their way through the palms, banana trees and frangipani that shielded them from Singapore's skyscrapers, jutting like mismatched teeth up into the blue sky.

Borys found himself fielding a barrage of memories he hadn't realised he still had: running across the grass with his sisters – turning and laughing as the sun caught the spray of the sprinklers, his parents sitting in creaking wicker chairs, sipping tea. He remembered the supreme hospitality of the staff who looked after his family year after year and the gravity with which his well-read father had spoken to them about the history of the hotel and the people who had once stayed there. "Literary lions of the British Empire," he'd called them, Borys's great, great grandfather Joseph Conrad among them.

He remembered that his mother had recited the words of Somerset Maugham to her enthusiastic children sitting around the dining table. "Raffles stands for all the fables of the exotic east!" she'd chant a prickle down Borys's spine – fables, exotic, East: those words were charged with the promise of adventure... He often wondered if, like Chantrea, he'd pursued a literary career because of the impression that Raffles had made on him? As a young boy, he would lie on his sumptuous bed, listening to the fiddling of the crickets and imagine elaborate stories set against this background of classic colonial splendour.

Joseph Conrad would have been proud. Borys paused. He had read that Raffles was opening its newest hotel in Poland and wondered what Conrad, the first visitor to Raffles in 1887, would think about this expansion into the country of his birth? There were definite parallels between the famous author and the (Raffles) Hotel Europejski, which was undergoing sympathetic restoration in Warsaw: both of them witnessed monumental historical events in their lifetimes; both the man and the building crossed seamlessly between cultures, they were true to their heritage but constantly evolving, encouraging new audiences with modern and relevant ideas, injecting atmosphere and bold intelligence into their surroundings. "We are bound to all these hotels, thought Borys. "They seem to be in our blood."

The door of his suite clicked open. Borys stepped inside and stood stock still, rifling through the memories that beat with feathered wings against the inside of his mind and trying to quell the emotion that wanted to break over him. The attentive concierge, aware of his change of mood, left silently, closing the door gently behind her. He breathed deeply and took his time to walk around the elegant rooms, his eyes lighting on touches of the familiar: Joseph Conrad's framed signature (he'd poured over that as a child), the hand-crafted chairs and writing table, complete with an ancient Corona typewriter, which he ran his fingers over fondly. The luxurious bed with its turned, fluted half-posts that matched the gleaming underfoot. There was such dedication to detail and heritage: the chandelier with its delicate golden whorls, the plump, overstuffed chairs clustered around the polished seaman's chest, the plants in their Chinoiserie pots bringing the greenery from outside in.

Borys sat on the edge of the bed and loosened his tie. He ran his hands over the fresh, cotton sheets and suddenly launched himself backwards fan and breathed a sigh of contentment. It was like coming home.

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