



THE LANGHAM SYDNEY HAS 86 rooms, each of them high ceilinged and plush, each of them accented by views of the city, or the harbour.

But last year, when the world stopped and the hotel completely shut down, such splendour went ignored. The vistas – angled from, say, the double drawing room of the Observatory Suite, or the balcony of a deluxe one-bedroom with separate lounge – went unobserved.

That is, except by the family in situ in The Residence, the hotel’s elegant two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment with, crucially, a modern kitchenette.

It was here that Shane Jolly, his wife Lauren and their sons Louis, six, and Edison, four, rode out the lockdown, in a space enlarged even further by an interconnecting suite – where a room was given over to Lego.

“Robots and cars, mainly, and a police mobile command centre,” grins Jolly, 47, who had only just been appointed the Langham’s new general manager.

“Racing their bikes around the hotel’s [three] floors while yelling and whooping was also pretty popular.”

Luxury hotel living has long been the stuff of fantasy, of aspiration. There’s the marble baths and 4am room service; the shuffling to the pool in bathrobe and slippers; the concierge and bar person who know your name; the catering to one’s every whim.

It’s little wonder, really, why the rich and

famous have form when it comes to upmarket tenancies: staff at the London Savoy knew the precise temperature of the porridge that the film and stage actor Richard Harris, who lived there during the last years of his life, enjoyed each morning.

The palatial Hotel Le Meurice in Paris

HOTEL HIDEAWAY

The Langham Sydney became home for its new general manager and his family when the city went into lockdown, giving them a taste of what life is like for those rare beings who reside in the world’s most splendid hotels.

STORY BY
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indulged plenty of surreal requests from one of their extended-stay regulars, painter Salvador Dali, who, legend has it, once asked staff to bring a small flock of sheep to his suite. Staff also brought him flies caught at the nearby Tuileries Garden.

Just up the road off Place Vendôme, the Hôtel Ritz Paris housed arguably the world’s best-known “live in” hotel guest of all time – fashion designer Coco Chanel – who resided in Suite 302 from 1937 until her death in 1971.

In the United States, the most famous guest of the infamously opulent Desert Inn of Las Vegas, businessman Howard Hughes, liked the joint so much that after his 10-day stay (taking the entire top two floors) was up and he was asked to make way for incoming guests, Howard dug in, and began negotiations to purchase the resort. By March 1967, it was his.

Another who toyed with buying the hotel he loved like a home was Australian socialite and former racing driver Captain Peter Janson, who lived at the Hotel Windsor in Melbourne for 12 years, until he was forced out in the 1980s. During his residence (in a



ONE NIGHT (OR PERHAPS A MONTH) IN HEAVEN

The Langham, Sydney's Observatory Suite starts at \$2468 per night. The Residence is priced from \$1968 per night (\$55,000 per month). langhamhotels.com/sydney



FACING PAGE: The lobby at The Langham, Sydney.

ABOVE: The Observatory Suite.

LEFT: Coco Chanel in her suite at The Ritz in Paris in 1938.

BELOW RIGHT: Shane Jolly and his family lived at the Langham and explored an empty Sydney CBD during lockdown.

tower in the 1883-built hotel), Janson was always served kippers for breakfast and his shoes were left, polished, outside his door each day. Management also tolerated his wild parties, which went on for days.

The owners of the Langham, Sydney need not be alarmed. The Jollys have no plans for a hostile buy out, nor did any wild parties take place. On the contrary, they had to fend for themselves during their prolonged stay in the The Residence, until life slowly returned to normal in the city, sparking the re-opening of the hotel on July 1.

But back in early April, when the family arrived on the last flight out of Auckland, where Jolly managed the five-star Cordis, Sydney had spiralled into lockdown.

The family was taken for a two-week stay in a quarantine hotel in Pymont. By the time they got out, the Langham Sydney was shut (on April 6). With Sydney in stasis – and their belongings still in New Zealand – they had little option but to move into the hotel.

“The owners were fantastic, they just wanted to help us in any way they could and quickly pointed out it was the best course of action,” says Jolly.

And so, from the beginning of April to the end of June, aside from a night manager working elsewhere, they were the only people in the building.

“I’ve worked in the hotel industry a long time,” says the Adelaide-born Jolly, whose CV spans The Peninsula brand in Bangkok and Beijing, and several Hyatt properties in Asia. “The kids have grown up around hotels. But to be able to enter any room without knocking or ringing a bell, just by pressing the key card to the lock, was surreal at first. Then we were like, ‘OK, let’s go exploring!’”

Between checking out all of the Langham’s design-led interiors – muted furnishings, bold patterned rugs, white wainscoted walls – they swam in the hotel’s 20-metre indoor heated pool under a ceiling painted with stars. Surrounded by murals, stone colonnades and, well, absolutely nobody.

Armed with wine, a block of cheddar and a camembert wheel (“With the hotel shut down, the chef opened the fridge and said: ‘Take what you want’”), they watched the sunset from a top-floor terrace. They raided the hotel kitchen for bowls, mixers and icing

spatulas. “We had three birthdays,” says Jolly, who gave the kids rides around the hotel’s vast marble foyer on brass-edged luggage trolleys.

The family also enjoyed regular movie afternoons, complete with popcorn, closed curtains and full bandwidth.

Shane and Lauren took turns in the hotel gym; as a family they walked through The Rocks, around Hyde Park, then down a deserted George Street. “We’d never lived in Sydney before,” says Jolly. “We really got to know the area. We shopped at local supermarkets and met neighbours who’d seen the lights on in The Residence and wondered who was living there.”

Longer-term hotel stays have become a feature of the pandemic. With flight schedules cut and travel options limited, hotels have seen an uptick in the sort of extended bookings popular in centuries past, when tenancies in high-class lodgings – a la Wes Anderson’s 2014 flick *The Grand Budapest Hotel* – was a thing.

Just think of the roll call at New York’s Chelsea Hotel during the 20th century (Madonna, Janis Joplin, Andy Warhol). Ditto Hollywood’s Chateau Marmont: Shawn Levy’s 2019 biography *Castle on Sunset* lists Robert De Niro, Jim Morrison and Howard Hughes among the big names sequestered behind its walls. All of whom, it seems, were ahead of the curve.

Now that people can work from anywhere, hunkering down in a deluxe room with a view and COVID-safe protocols is proving the way to go.

Last October, New York-based luxury travel advisory Embark Beyond launched Embark Longer, a collection of hotels and resorts offering villa-style accommodation with mini-leases, among them the Mandarin Orientals in Marrakech and Miami.

In Japan’s second largest city of Yokohama, the sailboat-shaped Grand Intercontinental Hotel has a Monthly Stay Plan – with toiletries, towels and weekly housekeeping – in place until the end of 2021, while Citizen hotels is offering a “global passport” that includes unlimited stays at any of its 21 boutique hotels (locations include London, Paris, Geneva and Boston) for seven to 29 nights per hotel at a time. “Move in with us,” they say.

As for Jolly, his live-in experience at the Langham was far more than a convenience on arriving in a strange city on the eve of a fully blown pandemic.

“I got to know every nook and cranny of the place,” he says. “There was a real sense that this was home. For nearly three months I’d go down to my desk in T-shirt and jeans and work with my office door open, looking straight out onto the lobby and thinking about how best to welcome guests – perhaps a sit down check-in area rather than the traditional front desk.”

Suffice to say, he and his management team really got the chance to reset the hotel. “Hotels are made for lots of people to be in,” Jolly concludes. “When we re-opened on July 1, I put on my suit and went down to my office. It was like: ‘OK, this is game on.’”

