



Holy City haven

The Mamilla Hotel is a cosmopolitan, calming oasis in bustling Jerusalem

• ERICA SCHACHNE

As a longtime resident of Jerusalem, with its intense traffic, people and politics, it is not unusual to find myself in stressful situations. It was thus with no small measure of relief that I stepped out of the gilt revolving door and into the Mamilla Hotel.

"Aaaaaah..." I could feel my shoulders relaxing. Billed as historic luxury nestled in the cradle of the Old City, Mamilla (meaning in Aramaic "I believe in God") seamlessly melds the best of the ancient with the very new. Located in what was once effectively a no-go zone between the city's Israeli and Jordanian sectors and what is today a pedestrian mall popular with both Jewish and Arab residents, the hotel offers urbanity in a capital that often still feels like a provincial village. Numerous awards, including inclusion in Fodor's Top 100 in The World's Best Hotels and *Condé Nast Traveler's* Top 10 Best Hotels in the Middle East, attest to the success of this approach.

Designed by celebrated architect Moshe Safdie, with one-of-a-kind interiors by Pierro Lissoni, every element in Mamilla is well thought-out to communicate a funky-fresh, open, younger vibe with a foot still anchored firmly in the old world. From the use of Jerusalem stone to the often-updated coffee-table books and art, down to the smallest knickknack, each conversational area is curated with different light, music and ambiance. And when you arrive in this unique

world, you – the guest – are someone special.

From minute one, you glide into the spacious, delicious-smelling lobby and are quickly checked in by a multilingual host who has been in touch before your arrival to record any requirements or allergies of note (and remains a point of contact upon a return visit). Need pickup from the gate? Of course. Your helicopter needs to find a landing strip? We can assist.

A bellhop then takes you and your luggage up to one of the 194 rooms and suites (which offer six categories of luxury, from studio to presidential) and explains its features, which the hotel's website describes as an encounter between "silk and stone, hi-tech and hand-carved, raw concrete and brushed oak." My compact Mamilla Suite boasted bespoke lamps, an espresso machine, American and European electric sockets, a mini TV in the bathroom area and access to the well-stocked Executive Lounge. The sumptuous Egyptian-cotton bedding, Bulgari amenities and deep-soaking bathtub beckoned; a box of fresh dates welcomed me in a very Jerusalem way. I tested the much-discussed wall separating the bedroom and bathroom areas, which goes from transparent to dark with the touch of a button, and beyond thinking it groovy, did not find it presented any potential modesty challenges.

WHAT OTHER wonders does the hotel hold? My hostess suggested I head out to the sundeck for some vitamin D and 360-degree views of the old and new

THE PANORAMIC view from the Rooftop Outdoor Lounge & Restaurant will enhance your risotto, while the newly launched winter menu will tickle your palate. (Photos: Mamilla Hotel)

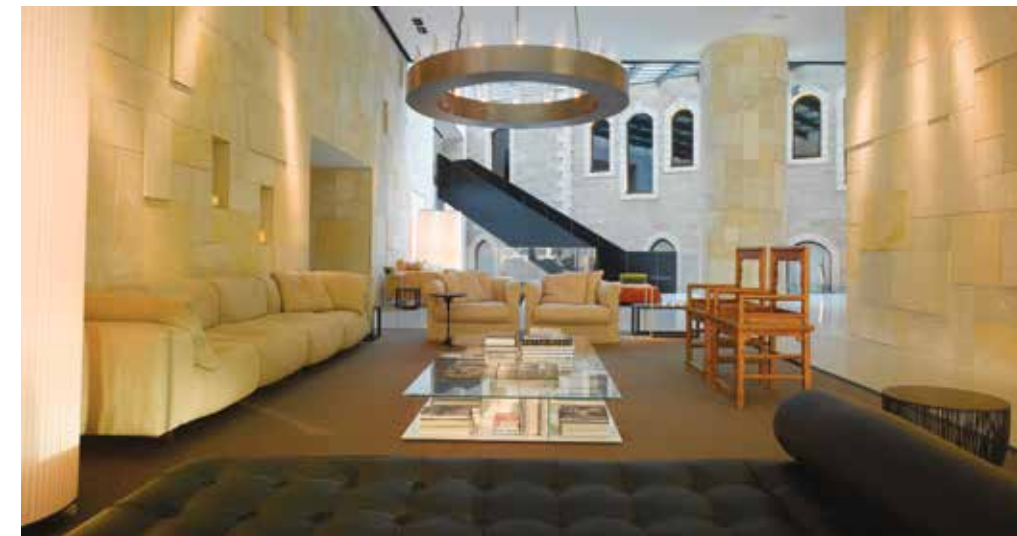
cities. Reclining in the dazzling rays, I envisioned the many huppas that take place there; the same space morphs into an action-packed press/broadcasting hub during papal and presidential visits. Honey-mooners can grab a bottle of bubbly and enjoy the soon-to-be-installed Jacuzzi.

I peeked into the ballroom (simha/conference capacity: 500); the cutting-edge auditorium for private screenings and lectures (up to 137 guests); and the Happy Fish restaurant (capacity 350, Jerusalem Mehadrin kashrut), which offers seasonal ethnic entertainment (Kurdish/Arabic night, live Greek music) and a generous Friday brunch buffet. The business center has all the equipment necessary for world-class wheelers and dealers, with a board room boasting a



THE POOL'S warm waters beckon.

ZEN MOMENTS await in the Akasha Holistic Wellbeing Center.



GLIDE INTO the stylish lobby and begin your journey in Mamilla's glorious world.



A SUPERIOR night's sleep awaits in the Mamilla Suite.

King Arthur-esque round table seating 13.

Feeling a bit parched, I had a glass of refreshment at the in-house winery, then strolled over to the next-door Mirror Bar. It was quiet this mid-afternoon, but I knew the upscale, sexy space – rife with what else? mirrors – would soon be humming with a DJ spinning, and swinging singletons and date-nighters ordering cocktails and tapas, with the men perhaps sneaking off for a puff or two in the adjacent Cigar Lounge.

Such activities were obviously exhausting, so a visit to the Akasha Holistic Wellbeing Center was quite in order, with its four areas corresponding to the four basic elements of Earth (lounge and bar); Water (spa, Watsu pool and Turkish hammam – *yesh!*); Fire (gym, aerobics studio and private training room); and Air (calming space for meditation, yoga and Pilates).

I was first going to experience Water. After a few zen moments in the meditation room, surrounded by visuals and sounds of crashing waves, I happily trooped over to a treatment room for a deep-tissue massage. And my tissues were certainly massaged; surrounded by the dulcet tones of mood music, my body felt lighter as the residual stress of workaday life evaporated.

I floated over to the Earth lounge in a cloud of Akashic well-being, where a warming pot of ginger tea and an intriguing book on tree-houses as homes awaited. Then I was off into the Air, in the form of an excellent Vinyasa yoga class in the Fire studio (other classes include spinning, core, aerial yoga and belly dancing). It was surprisingly therapeutic to go into a pigeon pose as the large windows revealed the people below, scurrying down Mamilla Mall, wrapped up in their everyday concerns.

I did have a schedule to adhere to: I headed back

to my suite for a shower (fantastic pressure, fragrant products) and change of clothing, then ambled up to the Rooftop Outdoor Lounge & Restaurant for a much-anticipated dinner. Considered one of Jerusalem's top restaurants, the Rooftop is perched on just that – Mamilla's roof – with arguably the best view in the city. Take a seat at the bar or settle in at one of the tables, as heat lamps make dining alfresco enchanting even in winter. It's not unusual to spot a Knesset member or famous writer. (Kashrut: Rabbanut Jerusalem.)

Once comfortably ensconced, let the culinary adventures commence! Attentive service, the hallmark of my Mamilla stay, was very much on parade: The knowledgeable sommelier suggested a superb Gush Etzion vintage from the extensive wine list, the waiter checked in at appropriate intervals and kept my goblet full of sparkling water. And the food! The food! Grouter shwarma with spicy tomato salad, herbs and lime, and roasted bone marrow with almonds, Brazil nuts and cabernet sauce were my decadent starters. It was, to employ a cliché, a thoroughly tasty fusion of Middle Eastern ingredients with the modern.

Though I am not always a fan of goose, the fusion continued as I devoured the roasted goose breast, cooked and seared sous vide, with bok choy, maple caramel sauce and improbably, Valrhona chocolate snow. The mushroom risotto with asparagus and truffle oil, to use another cliché, melted in my mouth.

The memorable meal ended with a digestif and a sublime slice of lemon pie with crispy mint leaves and burnt meringue, as I sat, dazed with delight and patting my sated stomach, admiring the view and musing over the rich pastiche that is Jerusalem.



AT BREAKFAST: Puddings, pastries and savories, oh my!

THE NEXT morning, I awoke refreshed. It was hard to leave the ridiculously cushy bed, but I wanted to fit in a dip in the indoor heated pool (such a luxury in Jerusalem!) before... dum da dum... breakfast.

Great success! Having gotten (a modicum of) exercise in the warm waters, surrounded by soothing violet mosaic walls, I was ready to feast. (Never mind that I was still somewhat full from my Rooftop repast.)

I was, of course, not disappointed. Seated in the lovely dining area, admiring the fuchsia begonia growing wild in the patio, I languidly sipped my freshly ground coffee, digging into oatmeal perfectly made to my specifications, a light and fluffy omelet with copious toppings, pickled herring with capers (the Ashkenazi in me was singing) and a veritable Viennese table of divine pastries (cherry tart, rice pudding, carrot cake and chocolate foodstuffs too numerous to recount).

And suddenly, sadly, it was time to check out: With a new sense that all was right in the (Mamilla) world, I packed my bags and reluctantly returned my passport to this rarefied land... er, room key... to my smiling hostess.

Did I need transportation home? she inquired.

No, I would take the bus, I assured her.

And just like that, I was a regular citizen of Jerusalem again – albeit an infinitely more well-rested, calm and collected one. ■

The writer – the editor of the Magazine and In Jerusalem – was a guest of the hotel. erica@jpost.com