

Sunday, March 11, 2007

Section 5

CHECK IN/CHECK OUT

LOUISVILLE, KY.:
21C HOTEL MUSEUM

THE BASICS

At Louisville's newest boutique hotel, every employee is a de facto docent bubbling with the energy of new discovery. "Trust me," said the bellman. "You've got to see the public bathrooms on the first floor." Our waitress steered us to elaborate woodcuts in the hotel restaurant's hidden banquet room. Opened in April 2006 and designed by Deborah Berke & Partners, the 21c Museum Hotel strikes a delicate artistic balance by presenting contemporary artwork — at turns haunting, light-hearted and challenging — in space that does double duty as public art museum and money-making upscale hotel. More MoMA than "match the sofa" aesthetic, the rotating collection also includes video installations and sonic environmental pieces. Waiting for the elevator, you'll have time to appreciate Chuck Close's "Lucas," a 1999 portrait in woven silk and linen. Many pieces are from the private collection of the owner-developers, Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson. From the four-foot red polyethylene penguins on the Main Street facade to the video works in the lounge off the lobby, the 21c's collection is never more than a glance away.

THE LOCATION

In the heart of downtown Louisville, the 91-room hotel complex is two blocks from the Ohio River. It's a short walk from the new Muhammad Ali Center, the glitzy Fourth Street Live entertainment strip and the Kentucky International Convention Center

THE ROOMS

Our river-view king room mimicked an efficient live/work loft space: a feather duvet and locally woven throw blanket covered luxurious 500-thread-count sheets; exposed brick walls played against brushed steel and neutral gray carpets. Road warriors will welcome the well-designed workspace with Herman Miller Aeron chair, wireless Internet service, a cordless phone and an anodized aluminum desk. Less productive types will flop down in the comfortable reading chair to unwind with the in-room iPod.

Etched silver-plated julep cups replace standard in-room glassware; a single-cup Flavia coffeemaker marks a distinct improvement on the standard in-room java experience. A nearly overwhelming 42-inch flat-screen plasma television hugs the brick wall. The river view was nominal at best — less panoramic than disappointing "down the block" oblique — not worth the \$30 upgrade from a standard king room.

THE BATHROOMS

Sufficient but a little cramped compared with the well-lighted comfortable room. A few flourishes (a full range of Malin + Goetz toiletries, pillowy robes, a yellow rubber ducky for the tub) add a little bit of fun to an otherwise unremarkable space.

AMENITIES

Selections from the museum's collection and curated exhibitions appear around every turn — from the cavernous basement-level gallery to the banquette walls at Proof on Main, the hotel's equally sophisticated restaurant. Run by Drew Niepornt's Myriad Restaurant Group — the folks who gave you Nobu and the Tribeca Grill — Proof is one of the city's hottest dining tickets, with riffs on Tuscan favorites. Michael Paley's double-smoked ham salad with bourbon aoli (\$9) and Kentucky bison burger (\$14) anchor the earthier side of the menu, and cracker-thin truffled mushroom pizza (\$10) and nightly specials (\$15 to \$23) highlight the Mediterranean connection.



Michael Clevenger for The New York Times

Art is important at the 21c Hotel Museum.

ROOM SERVICE

Proof's kitchen and bar provide a limited room service menu during standard kitchen hours, including 5 selections from their 60-whiskey lineup. (This is bourbon country, after all.) Breakfast options reflect Proof's delicate touch with smoked salmon with citrus vinaigrette (\$11) and light brioche French toast (\$11) edging out standard morning options. The plates arrived piping hot at the designated time.

BOTTOM LINE

An innovative concept with strong execution and prompt and enthusiastic service. Allow plenty of time for exploring 21c's less obvious exhibition spaces, including, as the bellman suggests, those infamous artistic restrooms. Weekend rates on the hotel's Web site run from \$109 for a double room to \$349 for the corner suite.

21c Hotel Museum; 700 West Main Street, Louisville, Ky.; (502) 217-6300.

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