



Bankside Marriott review: a prestige art hotel in Southbank

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TRAVEL



A sleek and stylish luxury newcomer on the banks of the Thames

There's something magical about London's Southbank in the spring. All of a sudden the riverside comes to life as people enjoy the simple pleasure of a stroll in the sunshine along Queen's Walk, enhanced by the gentle susurrations of the River Thames which has a strangely meditative quality at this time of year. There are the busy second-hand book stalls tucked away under Waterloo Bridge, as well as a plethora of exotic food stalls along this stretch of the embankment, selling everything from fresh falafels to Mexican poke. And of course, there's the draw of culture – all the more tempting in warmer climes – which caters to all tastes thanks to easy reach to Tate Britain, the BFI, the Hayward Gallery and the South Bank Centre. Street performers also seem to up their game with more elaborate displays of talent, from hip hop contortions to mind-boggling bubble shows.

Up until recently, the Sea Containers hotel, formally The Mondrian, was regarded as the bastion of luxury in these parts thanks to its plush decor and spectacular views of the river. Thanks to its vantage point near the Oxo Tower, this hotel continues to attract a transient crowd of day-trippers enticed by the promise of posh brunch, high tea and fancy cocktails. Subsequently, the hotel lacks an 'exclusive' feel which is where the Marriott's new Bankside 'Autograph' hotel comes in. While Bankside isn't situated exactly on the river strip, it is a stone's throw away from Blackfriars Bridge (and a four-minute walk from Southwark tube station) with impressive top level views of the Thames and Saint Paul's Cathedral. Unlike Sea Containers, Bankside has an exclusive luxury feel which is tailored to 'those in the know' – that is to say, discerning visitors to the city who are drawn to hotels with personality as opposed to those that stick to rigid 'stylised' design codes.



Part of the Marriott's bespoke 'Autograph' range, Bankside is denuded of the word 'hotel' – it doesn't even appear above the entrance. In fact, the building, Lego-like in its simplicity and only five storeys high, could well be mistaken for a block of luxury flats. Art is a big factor here and unlike many 5-star establishments that adopt this cachet, Bankside has done so in an easy, warm and welcoming manner. Like all good interior design, you'll find a mish-mash of well curated styles: smart Danish furniture, 'low-glow' sculptural lighting, colourful abstract ceramics (most of which are sourced from local artisans), retro 'Kitchen Sink' artworks and contemporary canvases by British-based artists.

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Bankside's reception area has a boutique-like feel, and every corner of the hotel has something to pique your interest thanks to the eclectic taste of in-house curator Dayna Lee, whose vision it was to create an inviting gallery-style environment. If at this point you're struggling with the image of a stark and intimidating Mayfair gallery, think again. Bankside is more St Ives in spirit with its colourful and imaginative medley of artworks which count Mid-Century canvases, intricate pottery pieces, whimsical antiques and new art commissions including a trio of tongue-and-cheek portraits by artist Helen Gorrill (who's had shows at Tate Modern and New York's Brooklyn Museum) which playfully recast Sir Christopher Wren, the Mona Lisa and Shakespeare as you've never seen them before.

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The Art Yard at the back of the hotel is a slick neutral-toned restaurant lit by a ceiling full of industrial light shades joined together by a jumble of cables like a cloud of looping paint strokes. Here, along the walls, you'll find jolly hand-painted tiles by award winning artist Laura Carlin; they represent a storyboard of Southbank life set to her colourful Native style.



It should be noted that the fayre at the Art Yard is well worth a visit to the hotel, even if you haven't booked a room. Each day, fruit and veg is sourced locally from Borough Market and all dishes are made from seasonal ingredients, also UK sourced in the main. Starters are 'to share'. My companion and I ordered the delectable Anchovies Fritti (£4.50), along with the wonderfully light and citrusy

doisetado with avocado and pistachios (£8) followed by the garnard tartare, a super tangy and moorish take on ceviche with blood orange and jalapenos (£8). For our mains, we chose a perfectly achieved 'a point' sirloin steak (£26.50) with fat chips (double cooked in dripping) as well as succulent chicken in red wine with polenta, pancetta and cep mushrooms (£14.50), which was hearty but still light enough to allow for pudding.



The restaurant has a very decent wine list but given the arty atmosphere we opted for cocktails. My friend's 'honey washed Negroni' was without a doubt the winning tittle of the evening. The chocolate fondant for dessert was a triumph of oozeiness too. Rooms at Bankside are stylish in a homely but refined way. The best way to describe the decor is that it sits somewhere between Scandi lifestyle boutique and 1960's sculpture studio thanks to minimalist wooden furniture, caramel-coloured furnishings and spa-like bathrooms clad in marble and black stone. There are a number of A-list worthy suites with impressive views of the river and cityscape, but Bankside has adopted tiered room categories which means that if you are a savvy planner, you can bag a handsome 'modest double' for around £227 a night.



It's the finer details and surprising quirks that give Bankside its unique, luxury feel too. On every floor, you'll find a high tech vending machine which stocks champagne, fine wines and gourmet treats as well as designer goodies such as Tom Ford fragrances and Wolford tights. The in-room telecoms system is touch screen and should you decide to splash out on a suite, bathroom mirrors transform into TV screens. A small gym in the basement is equipped with state-of-the-art machines and can be accessed all day and night thanks to the touch card system.

Unusually Bankside has a 'Makers in Residence' programme: it offers its own studio space, located at the far end of the hotel with its own separate entrance, to emerging artists who can work here for up to three months at a time. Guests are welcome to pay the artist a visit and they can even join specially tailored walking tours devised by the hotel. Bankside is therefore an ever-evolving luxury operation which sets a precedent when it comes to experiential sleep-overs. Other hotels in the vicinity will surely be taking note.

Classic rooms start at £250 per night excluding breakfast.

For more information and to book, visit www.banksidehotel.com/about/autograph-collection

The Art Yard restaurant costs approx £45 per person for three courses without drinks. Bankside, 2 Blackfriars Rd, Upper Ground, South Bank, London SE1 9JU. Tel: 020 3319 5988

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