

# Hotels compete in cool overhauls

► CHICAGO  
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lift earlier this year, with muted palettes of pewter and blue that mirror the colors of lake living. Design details like quirky photographs of Chicago landmarks, circular porthole-style mirrors, and smoky Art Deco glass bars pay homage to the city. Look for a continuing overhaul to the property (currently still heavy on wood paneling and chandeliers) in the coming year.

New life has also come to the **Blackstone**, a historic 1910 Beaux Arts stunner in the South Loop across from Grant Park, which recently received a meticulous \$128 million restoration courtesy of Renaissance Hotels. Rooms have custom duvets and special "gentleman's armoires" for business travelers; guests with a hankering for the past can stay in the restored "smoke-filled room" suite of Warren G. Harding's 1920 Republican presidential nomination. The hotel also has its own museum-quality art collection, with a rotating exhibit of 1,400-plus works by Chicago artists in the grand Art Hall.

Of course, design-conscious visitors in town for modern art — particularly Renzo Piano's new glass-enclosed contemporary wing at the venerable Art Institute of Chicago — might prefer a less buttoned-up aesthetic. For these travelers, there's the **James Chicago**, whose ground-floor lobby by showcases a rotating gallery of pieces in partnership with local curators, including Monique Meloche. Next to the check-in desk, I encountered a pile of colorful vintage suitcases heaped with the contents of a deconstructed Texas motel room, part of an installation by the Chicago-based artist Joel Ross.

Collections in the residential-style lofts, which have little dining areas and private projection-TV nooks, include framed photographs and prints by Michael Kenna, Wendy Small, and Wolfgang Ludes. There's even art in

the building's airshaft, and the James partners with the AIC for special programs.

The crowd at the lobby bar on a recent weeknight was eclectic: a mix of business travelers and Italian runners in town for the marathon. Some guests trickled into Primehouse, the James's restaurant, which serves a mean steak; bar snacks here are also a cut above, with chili-oil cheese sticks and truffled-chocolate popcorn. More innovations are found at weekend brunch, with executive chef Rick Gresh's inventive new "American dim sum" menu: Servers bring around rolling carts of 25 small-plate items, including almond pancakes, tempura green beans, and oatmeal crème brûlée.

Just around the corner in the gallery-lined River North neighborhood is the **Dana Hotel and Spa**, opened last year and another addition to the lodgings "it" list. I loved the new building's distinctive organic forms and textures: bamboo bricks, undulating wood walls that gleam like copper, recycled-glass terrazzo floors. Floor-to-ceiling windows let natural light and the urban landscape into every room. The day spa, which occupies a tranquil space on the fourth floor lined in iridescent blue tile, wood, and glass, is open to the public; botanical product lines feature soothing ingredients like sage, olive, and avocado oils.

The electric-green awning at the **Wit Hotel**, opened in May across the Chicago River, signals a decidedly more charged character. Aimed at the 20- and 30-something crowd, the establishment is tricked out with gold pillows, feathery glass chandeliers, and a double-high phoenix mural in the lobby. Huge glass windows extend to the second floor, with gritty views of the elevated train platform at State and Lake.

"You know that old Sinatra song line, 'On State Street, that great street: I like to think of this area as the phoenix rising again,'"



SALLY RYAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Wit Hotel offers views of Chicago's renowned architecture, such as the original Jewelers Building at 35 East Wacker Drive.

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www.fourseasons.com/chicagofs  
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**James Chicago**

55 East Ontario St.  
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www.jameshotels.com  
Doubles from \$250.  
**Ritz-Carlton Chicago**  
160 East Pearson St.  
312-266-1000  
www.fourseasons.com  
Doubles from \$235 (both the Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons are aiming for affordable with rate specials and packages, like the ongoing "third night free" deal).  
**Wit Hotel**  
201 North State St.  
312-467-0200  
www.thewithotel.com  
Doubles from \$179.



BONNIE TSUI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A revamped guest room at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago.

Michael Lyman, the Wit's director of sales and marketing, said as we talked about the recent re-

vitalization of the neighborhood. The Wit is definitely lively. The expansive 27th-floor rooftop

lounge — with cozy booths, gas-fire features, and thrilling panoramas of downtown, it's proba-

bly the hotel's best feature — gets successive waves of customers, from happy hour to late night. The full-service spa has hot pink walls and a 24-hour gym and yoga studio. All 298 rooms have kitchenettes, and the decor is punctuated by bright-orange chaise longues, whimsical photographs, and framed vintage Esquire magazine covers.

Walking the Wit's hallways, I heard the unmistakable chirping of birds: The hotel's "white noise" soundtrack includes babbling brooks and other nature sounds. Buttoned-up it's not.

The newcomers on the hospitality front are definitely loosening things up. And that's a good thing. In a city called home by the coolest president in US history, it's definitely time to keep up to the moment.

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# Rich with history, high in Transylvania

By Neece Regis  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BRASOV, Romania — Thick morning fog was lifting from Council Square, slowly dissipating as the sun pressed above the rim of the nearby mountains and pastel buildings glowed in the brightening light. At that moment, as the cool air carried a scent of burning from distant fields, it struck me that I was quite far from familiar things and that I loved being in Brasov.

I had arrived the night before, after a hundred-mile train ride from the capital, Bucharest, along a route that meandered through the lush Prahova Valley before climbing into the southern Carpathian Mountains that rim Brasov like a crown. I wanted nothing but to wander the streets, admiring the mix of Gothic, Baroque, renaissance, and romantic period buildings in the center, and possibly to sit at an outdoor cafe, drinking espresso.

so. And that's just what I did.

Brasov has been a cultural and commercial center of Transylvania since as early as the 13th century. Its location between the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe made it a trade route hub. The original medieval settlement, founded by the Teutonic Knights in 1211 and settled by the Saxons, has been preserved and restored, drawing historians and tourists to the old city where there's plenty to do and see.

A good place to begin a walking tour is Council Square, also referred to as the Marktplatz, a wide and active central plaza that's said to be where the legendary Pied Piper led the entranced children of Hamelin. I didn't hear any pipers, though the influence of the Saxons is everywhere you look, from ornate churches to the colorful facades of three- and four-story buildings trimmed and decorated like fanciful cakes.



A vegetable and fruit market, and a street leading to the Gothic landmark Black Church, which towers over the old city.



PHOTOS BY NEECE REGIS/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Black Church, said to be the largest Gothic church between Vienna and Istanbul, is on the southwest corner of the square. Contrary to the image the name conjures, the church is not black. It was given this moniker in 1689, after a fire destroyed much of the town and blackened the church's interior walls. Although the exterior retains its Gothic character, the lofty, light-filled interior restoration is mainly Baroque, with stained glass windows, stone columns, balconies, an elaborate 4,000-pipe organ, and walls adorned with 17th- and 18th-century Anatolian carpets. Only one of two original towers was rebuilt and it houses the largest church bell in Romania, a seven-ton marvel.

Brasov has at least six other historic churches, encompassing 13th- through 19th-century styles built for Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Romanian Orthodox worshippers. In the oldest section of the city, the Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas is a wondrous sight, with one tall spindly tower surrounded by four smaller ones. Enclosed by a protective wall that also shelters a small cemetery, the cathedral's architectural style ranges from Byzantine through Baroque with a smattering of Gothic. A synagogue, built in 1901 in a neo-Roman/Moorish style, still serves the small Jewish community that remains since World War II.

The History Museum of Brasov is, appropriately, housed in the historic 13th-century Old Town Hall. A medieval watch-

tower, known as the Trumpeter's Tower, sits atop the building, where, presumably, a trumpet sounded a warning as enemies approached. The museum's exhibitions explain the dominance of Saxon guilds in medieval times, and display artifacts from ancient to modern times, such as Paleolithic Age stone tools, bronze and iron armor, farming implements, and weapons.

When fresh breezes beckon, bearing scents of pine and oak, you can hike nearby Mount Tampa for a bird's-eye perspective of Brasov. On the southeast side of the town's fortress walls, the tree-shaded Brediceanu Alley leads to the start of a hiking trail that takes about an hour to climb. There is also a cable car to the mountain top, up 3,000 feet. From this height, it's easy to survey the terra-cotta roofs and watch the comings and goings of townspeople.

If, like me, all this hiking and touring makes you hungry, there are plenty of places to dine, from casual bistros to restaurants serving Romanian cuisine accompanied by elaborate, if touristy, shows featuring music and costumed performers. In addition to traditional foods, such as grilled meats, sausages, cabbage rolls, and stews prepared in cast-iron kettles, restaurant choices are as numerous as the conquests by foreign invaders: an Argentine steakhouse, a German bistro, a French restaurant, an Indonesian cafe, a Chinese kitchen, a Viennese saloon, a Greek taverna. Sometimes incongruous com-

binations occur, such as the music hall in a 400-year-old cellar that features Mexican and Hungarian foods, or the Italian pub with Mediterranean and Romanian cuisines that features Guinness stout. Romania has several winemaking regions, providing decent choices to accompany local cuisine. Transylvania produces dry white wines like pinot gris and sauvignon blanc, as well as aromatic muscats and sparkling rieslings.

In the old city, Republicii Street is pedestrian-only, making it easy to stroll and shop. In addition to clothing and shoe boutiques, you will find stores selling jewelry, sporting goods, books, and antiques. There are also art galleries and shops selling folk crafts, such as fragile painted or beaded eggs, embroidered clothing and linen, figurines, carpets, blankets, pottery, wood carvings, and icons. On the street, women sell their own handcrafted and embroidered tablecloths, skirts, blouses, and intricate lacework.

Brasov boasts a healthy night life, though I didn't explore the offerings listed in my hotel room guide. If I return, I'll be tempted to visit the Extra Time Café, since any place that advertises, "Enter this bar if you are in love with twist, cha-cha-cha or rock and roll," might work for me.

Until then, I'll savor the memories of smoke from faraway fields while recalling the simple pleasures of Brasov.

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