

# The Pilgrm

## The Pilgrm, London

Words: Harry McKinley

For those unfamiliar with London, Paddington must surely conjure images of Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s grand railway station – all wrought iron and Victorian brick – and evoke quaint associations with Michael Bond’s famous plodding bear. A vision of romantic Englishness through and through. For Londonders, it’s rather different. Often thought of as the shabbier neighbour to the likes of affluent Marylebone, Paddington has a reputation as a warren of dreary bedsits, fast food joints and sagging townhouses that have gone years without the loving caress of a paintbrush.

It’s an increasingly unfair perception, of course, as the area is undoubtedly on the up. The on-going regeneration of Paddington Basin has brought a slew of new eateries, a fortnightly street food market and transformed the canal into a pleasant walkway bordered by steely stretches of modern office architecture.

Then there’s The Pilgrm, intended to shake up not just Paddington’s uninspired hotel scene, but that of the capital at large. One only needs to glance from the two-star guesthouse across the street with its peeling sills and strip-lit signage to the slick, stylish façade of The Pilgrm to see that it is a new proposition for the neighbourhood. Even from street level, where broad windows afford passers-by a glimpse into the ground

floor café, there’s a sense of design and intent.

The Pilgrm is the invention of Jason Catifeoglou, former partner and general manager of The Zetter Hotel in Clerkenwell; Andreas Thrasyvoulou, founder of myhotels; and Steph Thrasyvoulou. Together they set out to reconsider what a typical hotel looks and feels like, and also how it functions. The inessential has been stripped away and in its stead is an ethos of efficiency and the adoption of a lifestyle-centric attitude, for which F&B is key. In terms of guest experience, it starts at the door. At The Pilgrm check-in as an entirely online process and overnighters searching for a reception desk will find only the counter of the café.

“We asked ourselves what it would feel like to arrive at a hotel, but instead of a reception desk you would step straight into a coffee shop,” says Catifeoglou. “The Pilgrm idea was first born in a coffee shop and whether it’s inspiration, stillness or time spent with friends and family, great coffee shops are the hub of any community or neighbourhood.”

As neighbourhood cafés go, The Pilgrm delivers for staying guests and locals alike. A hefty Faema machine dribbles high quality espressos and fresh doughnuts are queued up waiting to catch the eye of peckish punters. The hotel collaborated with CRU Kafe on unique blends, available nowhere else and with







Photography: Jason Bailey

bespoke packaging carrying The Pilgrim logo. It’s all about brand building, of course, and the same moniker graces water bottles available for purchase, which can be filled and refilled free of charge from the café’s water fountain. Free water is important to Catifeoglou and something that will remain a permanent fixture.

In looks, the café is sturdy and handsome, making use of original features and complementing them with fixtures sourced from old buildings – among them lights that once graced the walls of a hospital. The magnificent staircase was brought back to life thanks to hours of painstaking paint stripping and the pleasing, tactile scars of age have been brought to the fore with a spit and a polish.

A floor up and a more expansive lounge unfolds. The heart of The Pilgrim’s F&B operations, it is here that guests can order from a fully-fledged food menu and fade into a vintage leather sofa.

With room for just 40 to 45 covers (depending on a willingness to squeeze up or the general girth of guests), the lounge is compact by the standard of modern restaurants, but not claustrophobic. Lengthy windows look down onto the street and across to the bedrooms of that two-star mentioned previously – teasing them with glimpses of pork belly, wild mushroom cheese toastie and lentil dhal with grilled mackerel. Considering the accessible price points of The Pilgrim, it is a lesson, if ever there was one, to research before booking. But at least the F&B spaces are open to all.

“We’ve simplified everything about our food and drink offering but elevated the quality of what we offer,” says Catifeoglou. “The Pilgrim is based on journeys and learning. We feel that cooking is a reflection of culture – the differences through cultures being only ingredients and techniques. With Head Chef Sara Lewis, we’ve brought some of our favourite ingredients and techniques to Paddington. Our food menus are made up of a number of small plates with unique pairings and tasty fusions that challenge convention and expectation.”

Elements that may be considered obstacles at other hotels have, at The Pilgrim, been used to their advantage. The tiny open kitchen, no larger than a typical bathroom, feeds the atmosphere of the lounge, as chef, bartender and servers shuffle around each other – pots spluttering, glasses chinking and the smell of multiple dishes wafting over expectant diners.

“The kitchen and lounge required a symbiotic

relationship,” says Catifeoglou, when asked about the nature of providing a fleshed-out food and drinks offer from such small confines and within such close quarters to visitors. “This was a critical dimension and creating a fluid service delivery was paramount to any decisions. The solution was an open kitchen and dispense bar that serves as the focal point of the room. For us it was a process of thinking about operations and how they’re best suited for a specific space. It has been so enlightening and, like any journey, we’ve learnt a great deal on the way. In terms of square footage optimisation it is a demonstration of how to purpose a space, without compromising.”

For a lounge that wears multiple hats and functions as a dining space, bar, work area and general chill out zone, it is fitting that this ‘multifunctionalism’ has filtered down into the details of the design. The kitchen pass, clad in Verde Guatemalan marble, also serves as the dispense station for cocktails.

The drinks menu features creations from multiple leading bartenders – from Singapore to Dallas and Athens – who have loaned their mixes for The Pilgrim team to make on the other side of London, in Hackney, and sell by the glass at the bar. It’s an inventive model of delivering a drinks offer that feels vibrant and imaginative, without the complexity of making a cocktail bar work alongside a kitchen, and all within a veritable shoebox.

In terms of aesthetics, the lounge, like the rest of the hotel, feels of the moment and discreet – elements such as the hanging greenery and Millennial pink furnishings being particularly de rigueur. Catifeoglou and Steph Thrasyvoulou collaborated with Sheffield-based studio 93, on the design, and an assortment of objects, from glove moulds to retro toy cars, adorn spare surfaces and give a sense of personality – even if it’s a familiar one. It all makes for a pleasant picture. But then The Pilgrim is ultimately about more than how agreeable it looks in isolation. That simply this brand of hotel, with an eye to design and a nod to how the modern guest behaves, is available at a reasonable rate is – for London – a revelation. Likewise, that The Pilgrim’s brand of easy, presentable, Insta-worthy F&B is finding its footing in Paddington is a sign of the tide shift in the district and an indication that, for those in other neighbourhoods, it may just be worth the journey.

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