

Portland's Press Hotel honours the golden age of print

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If a new hotel in Portland, Me., is any indication, things are looking up for the printed word. Or at least the buildings where those words were once printed. Located in the original home of the Press Herald, the Press Hotel, a member of Marriott's Autograph collection, drenches itself in newspaper themes and decor references. Remnants of the old days of journalism are everywhere, including an original scale that was used to measure the weight of paper bundles on delivery. Still functioning, it now appropriately stands in the fitness room.



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Location, location

Perhaps not surprisingly the old Herald building is directly across Congress Street from Portland's City Hall. The city's best shops and restaurants are within a short walking distance, mostly down toward the Old Port. Keep that in mind: There are hills and your calves will feel it after a busy day of roaming the cobblestone streets. For the best vantage point in the city, make your way (uphill) on Congress Street to the Portland Observatory. Since 1807, this timbered tower has been used to observe ships making their way into the historic deep water harbour. On a clear day you might just catch a glimpse of the snow-covered peaks of New Hampshire's Mount Washington to the west.



Design

Before you walk through the front door, the giant typewriter keys that make up the hotel sign give you a hint of what you're in for. The lobby includes an installation by local artist Erin Hutton featuring dozens of vintage typewriters seemingly shimmying up a two-storey wall – like stout little aliens in the midst of an invasion.

The hotel's lower level is part meeting space, part art gallery, featuring installations from Maine artists in hallways and in the board rooms.

The interior signage mimics the typesetting reliefs – or “sorts” – that would have been used in the printing process back when the Herald was covering stories about hurricanes and the lobster catch. In the hallways, black-and-white wallpaper displays headlines used in the newspaper’s past. From the ceiling to the floor, the lines become more and more clustered before eventually exploding into a jumble on the carpet. And keep an eye out for the detail on the walls of the elevators. Bonus points if you can figure out the inspiration for the material used in the wall’s cladding. Hint: It involves a typewriter.



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The Press Hotel has text spilling from walls to the floor.

The rooms are bright and spacious while still maintaining a hard-edged and rather masculine tone. Power outlets are everywhere. Whoever is responsible for the details in the room has clearly had issues with maintaining the battery life of their smartphone: a power outlet can be found on both ends of the headboard, and on the desk (where a hinged metal top camouflages it as the lid of an old ink pad case).

To be honest, as a journalist, I can't say I connected much to the art and decor references. But you don't need to have lived in the days of hunting and pecking on an old Imperial to appreciate the mechanical and industrial charm of these pieces. If anything, the wall coverings and objets d'art stand as a sort of reverence to a golden age of a journalism that required a lot more sweat and lot less Wikipedia.



Best amenity

A Mercedes Sprinter shuttle is at your disposal for either your return to the airport, or just a hop to a waterfront fish shack. The ride is comfortable and free. An honourable mention goes to a simple yet

brilliant touch in the rooms: a one-inch thick, black reporter's notepad. It is slick, rugged and probably not meant to leave the room. But I have a feeling some guests may channel their inner Clark Kent and slip a few of these into their bags.

If I could change one thing

The building has been around for 92 years. If the walls can't talk, the hotel's ventilation system sure has a lot to say. The air conditioning is loud and, in my room, the vent was only a few feet above my pillow, shouting right in my face.



Eat in or eat out?

Having opened just this past May, not only has the hotel quickly generated buzz in town, so has its adjoining restaurant Union. Dishes will change with the seasons, but expect to see perennial favourites such as the butter lettuce salad with a goat's milk ranch dressing. And I would have loved to have seen the shells that once housed the seared scallops – at four to a plate, sided with spinach and pickled lentils, sharing is an acceptable option. You might also consider going halves on the Snickers cake for dessert. By all means, if you think you can handle the chocolate cake, homemade nougat, ganache, salted caramel and ice cream all on your own, go nuts.

*The Press Hotel, 119 Exchange St., Portland, Me.; thepresshotel.com.
110 rooms from \$219 (U.S.).*

The writer was a guest of the hotel.