

Lighting up in style: the gentleman's smoking room is back

December 21 2010, by Emma Charlton

Sink back into a leather armchair and let the grey plumes curl up to the ceiling: tobacco may be banned from bars and clubs across Western cities, but the gentleman's smoking lounge is making a comeback.

Even as Spain prepares to ring in the New Year with a [smoking](#) ban in bars, renegade nightspots in Paris and Berlin are bucking the European trend, opening designer smoking rooms, complete with pianos, pool tables and cigar lockers.

Since the French capital outlawed smoking in bars and clubs three years ago, sending hordes of punters onto the sidewalk to smoke and chat, the city has seen a surge in lawsuits pitting clubs and bars against their sleepless neighbours.

So it's hardly surprising that high-end Paris clubs are now spearheading the smoking lounge revival.

In the heart of the Latin Quarter on Paris' Left Bank, Castel -- a private club founded in 1958 which has hosted the likes of Mick Jagger or Romy Schneider -- just opened one as part of a top-to-bottom makeover.

Nestled just off the dance floor downstairs, Castel's smoking room boasts a grand piano that the chain-smoking chanteur Serge Gainsbourg used to play, under black-and-white shots of famous smokers -- all still living of course.

Stylish as it may be, Xavier Brunet, the club's head of public relations, says the smoking room is not intended as an attraction.

"We're not here to encourage people to smoke," Brunet told AFP. "It's just to do people a favour."

French law still allows indoor smoking spaces provided they have state-of-the-art ventilation and that no staff operate inside.

For Castel the room is simply a way to spare its members-only film, fashion and finance world clientele the indignity of huddling outdoors on the sidewalk -- and to keep on good terms with the neighbours.

"We don't want people spending hours in here with their drinks. And we don't play music in here -- although people are free to sit at the piano," Brunet said.

For that reason the atmosphere is designed to be elegant -- but not too comfortable, with just two leather seats embedded in the wall that are clearly intended to perch on, not doze off in.

Over the River Seine at the Royal Monceau luxury hotel, the owners have no such qualms.

Top designer Philippe Starck has created an old-style cigar bar dubbed "La Fumee Rouge" (The Red Smoke), which opens in January as part of a revamp of the 80-year-old hotel off the Champs Elysees.

Patrons are invited to pick an after-dinner liqueur from a trolley at the entrance and curl up with a paper and a Havana -- humble cigarettes not welcome here -- which regulars can stow for safekeeping in a private locker on site.

The Royal Monceau describes the 12-seater, red-lit bar as "a radical act".

While the modern-day smoking lounge caters to both men and women, the creators clearly have a masculine universe in mind.

The Royal Monceau, for example, says Starck aimed to recreate "the private clubs where men liked to gather in small, intimate groups, to read the papers and exchange views on the world."

Other Paris smoker havens include the Cafe Germain, which has a smoking salon complete with pool table and a giant yellow sculpture of a woman -- part of a zesty pop decor unveiled by Iranian designer India Mahdavi last year.

Trendy electro club Le Pompon has a neo-kitsch basement smoking room complete with Liberty-print wallpaper, while punters at the Cubana Cafe can carry their mojito through to a leather armchair in the smoking salon next door.

Like Paris, Berlin has banned smoking in larger bars that serve food since 2008, but still allows patrons to puff away in separate rooms that often cater to a well-heeled crowd.

On the Ku'damm, for instance, Berlin's answer to the Champs Elysees, the Times Bar at the Savoy Hotel has a smokers' lounge complete with wood-panelled walls and deep leather chairs.

Upscale eateries also have smoking lounges, like the Grill Royal, where big business honchos and the likes of Oliver Stone dine when in town, featuring a picture of a young, topless Jane Birkin.

The Newton Bar, an upmarket cocktail joint on Berlin's elegant Gendarmenmarkt square with black-and-white Helmut Newton signature

nudes on the walls, has had one since opening in 1998.

Responding to "strong demand", the bar opened a new room, the "Havana Smokers' Lounge", in February this year, and also has a walk-in humidor where visitors can buy and store cigars.

"It doesn't scare anyone off. If you don't smoke you can stay downstairs in the normal Newton bar," a spokeswoman told AFP.

"There are still lots of cigar lovers around and I think that if you want to combine that with a nice drink, they will seek out places where they can celebrate that."

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Citation: Lighting up in style: the gentleman's smoking room is back (2010, December 21)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-style-gentleman-room.html>

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