

WE HAVE come down to breakfast at Paris's St James Hotel, where Pilou, the hotel's rotund black cat, is seated on a red-brocaded chair at an adjoining table and gazes fixedly at us. He walks over to inspect us, declines a pat and stalks off.

Pilou and many other things make this a very different hotel. There are the panther prints on the dining room's carpet, walls adorned with copies of 19th-century masters and, in contrast, doors opening to an adjoining room which reflects English club decor, with deep, leather armchairs and couches, lavishly stocked bar and handsome old books from floor to ceiling.

Then the lounge, with Napoleon III-style furniture, more panther prints, 14 metres of chandelier "chaos", grand staircase in black and white opening on to 350 square metres of gardens with fantastic arbours in the shape of hot-air balloons, the fabric in blue with pink roses, replicating those that took off here more than a century ago.

The St James is Paris's only chateau-hotel, off avenues Foch and Victor Hugo, a quiet enclave minutes from the chaotic traffic of the Champs Elysees, on the site of Paris's first airfield for the launch of those hot-air balloons. A statue at the imposing gatehouse recalls the chateau was built in 1892 by the widow of French president and historian Adolphe Thiers, as a memorial to her husband.

It became a British-owned, exclusive club in the mid-1980s. Now, with French family owners, it has undergone a stunning makeover by eccentric-chic French-American designer Bambi Sloan, who

And now for something completely different

Where could be more romantic than Paris at Christmas? **John Coleman** stayed at the St James, the city's only chateau-hotel

has complemented the panther prints with bold colours, French provincial and Parisian furniture, some bought at flea markets, and wry British humour. Remarkably, it all blends and the venerable mansion maintains its classic look.

Bambi, graphic artist, former ballerina and fashion and events PR person, who has also redesigned the award-winning Whisky Lodge on the Hebridean island of Jura, has three rooms at the hotel and is adding finishing touches to St James's transformation during our stay.

We learn that those sweeps of black on the balustrades and arches of the red-carpeted, grand staircase were inspired by the Cecil Beaton fashions in *My Fair Lady*, in which the women at the

Ascot races wore white dresses with waists accentuated by black belts. The lounge's columns are sheathed in old bookbinding-like wallpaper.

There's also a spiral staircase where Bambi has sketched a medley of hot-air balloons for the wallpaper, including in the blue and pink roses, no doubt drawing on the faded print of the original in the small lift. The two floors above are illuminated by lines of wood-frame balloons, bulbs like tongues of fire, the suite doors lacquered in bright red.

Design of every room and suite - there are 48, mostly suites averaging 50 square metres - is exotically different. Our suite has Bambi's inspired deep-brown carpet, replicating parquetry flooring, wallpaper soft sage green, and Italian-style carved bedhead.

The bathroom is huge, with an old-fashioned clawed tub fit for two, vanity converted from a credenza with rust-coloured marble top, his/her burnished brass sinks, wall tiles in charcoal, wallpaper grey and white. The hallway has another, more-modern version of the bathroom. Like the rest of the hotel, the suite is lavishly fitted with mirrors and chandeliers, fabric on window shutters, the lounge spacious with brocaded chairs, antique-style desks and chests.

Elsewhere, Bambi has daringly combined colours, like black and turquoise, a room in all-white opening on to the garden, a two-level, rust-coloured "masculine" suite for businessmen.

Suites have names such as The Little Madeleine, The Grey One and The Last Queen of Scotland, combining tartans and panther prints.

The John Steed suite, recalling the British Avengers TV series, is in all-male decor with striped flannel wallpaper, complete with bowler hats and furred umbrella.



The grand stairway

Travel facts

- John Coleman was the guest of St James Hotel and was assisted in Europe by Rail Plus.
 - St James joins some 60 exclusive hotels worldwide in January as part of the Relais and Chateaux group.
 - Rooms from 370 euros; suites from 650 euros.
- Address: 43 Avenue Bugeaud 75116, Paris; phone +33 1 4405 8181, www.saint-james-paris.com



The hotel's exterior

Bambi works on two new suites at the gatehouse during our stay - one, general manager Yves Monnin tells me, the "Romantic" suite on three levels, with kitchenette and underground spa, the other for families, also on three levels, with kitchenette and cinema/games room.

You can still join the St James Club - women welcome - for 1,600 euros a year; it has almost 1,000 members who use the facilities for breakfast, lunches and meetings. Most of the hotel's guests are repeats, says Monnin.

The hotel has its own spa and underground gym. Executive chef Cyrille Robert's restaurant creations include white sturgeon caviar (150 euros), smoked Scottish salmon, lentils with hazelnuts and lettuce froth (33



The library at the St James

euros), and pan-fried fillet of Salers beef, mushrooms and white truffle cream (38 euros).

We learn why the hotel cat, Pilou, adopted by the hotel after his beloved elderly woman owner went into a nursing home, snubbed us.

He is famous, after being photographed gazing in silent dialogue with a famous French writer the morning after the writer, hands on head, celebrated a major award. The photo appeared in *Paris Match*.



The striking hot-air-balloon wallpaper