



Undercover at the U.N. Lounge, Where Diplomats Get Drunk and Handsy

Noreen Malone
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In keeping with this week's theme, today Allegra is happy to direct you to a piece written by [Noreen Malone](#), and featured in [New Republic](#) earlier this year. Following yesterday's [post](#) by Joshua Clark, it takes readers to another scene of sociality at the United Nations headquarters in New York: the North Delegate's Lounge. There, as Malone's title puts it, "diplomats get drunk and handsy." We hope that you will enjoy this humorous, demystifying glimpse into a world not well known to even those most well-versed in the everyday life of diplomacy and international relations.



Not so long ago, the North Delegates' Lounge, the in-house bar of the United Nation's headquarters in New York, was dark and smoky and filled with Barcelona chairs and white leather. It was "out of James Bond," a female French-Canadian U.N. employee recalled wistfully. Then the lounge closed three years ago for a makeover (part of a larger building renovation), led in part by the designer Hella Jongerius and architect Rem Koolhaas. The pair opted for, or at least signed off on, furnishings in various shapes of molded plastic and shades of bright green. Now, "it's like Ikea," the woman said, gesturing with her drink and surveying the redone room. An even more devastating comparison occurred to her. "It's like a terrible airport lounge. Look at the WELCOME sign!" She pointed out giant letters on a geometrically patterned white wall near the entrance that did bring on feelings of jet lag. Coats and laptop bags were scattered everywhere, under fluorescent lighting that would make James Bond squint. "This reflects poorly on the world."



Photo by Nathan Meijer



And yet: The place was mobbed. The United Nations has six official standing committees; the in-joke is that the lounge is its seventh, because of all the bilateral negotiating that gets done there pre-6 p.m. (Those so inclined can now also do some e-mail-checking, on a bank of computers — Windows computers — encased in frosted plastic, space-age half-bubbles.) But after dark, ambassadors and bureaucrats freed from politesse and forms-processing throng the space with a different agenda. At night, and especially on Friday nights, the new North Delegates' Lounge is either the world's most fun conference room or its least sexy-looking nightclub.

The bar is also not open to journalists without a standing U.N. press pass. But with persistence and a little tradecraft, it is possible to get oneself and one's recorder past the security guards. Among the regulars found inside on a recent Friday evening was a bubbly French-Moldovan woman who had frequented the



pre-renovated lounge during previous tours at the United Nations. She met her Iraqi boyfriend at the bar; they are both on yearlong postings, just long enough for love to blossom. When the woman worked at the United Nations as a 21-year-old intern, she found that the lounge was a good place to mingle with more senior officials.

“You had a lot of interns, and also a lot of diplomats ... interacting,” she said. “People realize you’re an intern, especially the diplomats, you had them passing by, and then grabbing your ass.”

But it was an elevated atmosphere in which to fend off advances. “You knew that diplomats were sitting here through the cold war,” she said, “smoking cigars, drinking whiskey, and trying to, you know, solve it.”



Photo by Russ Allison Loar

It is an unfortunate truism that in New York the first question you get in most social situations is what you do for a living. At the North Delegates’ Lounge, though, “Where are you from?” takes its place. France, Germany, Guyana, Mexico, Spain. “Ohio” passed for an exotic reply. As can be the case in such a crowd, the cosmopolitanism sometimes circled back around so far as to sound like



Archie Bunkerism. Ethnicities were guessed at. “Constantine ... so, like, Russia?” An Australian talked about being frequently mistaken for Kiwi. “The” was appended in front of nationalities: The Africans were sitting in a group near us, The Chinese had something going on in the hallway, The Koreans were the reason one drinker had to go back to his office after his beer was done. But stereotypes were also lived up to, at least by the beautiful makeup-free Frenchwoman in an impeccable blazer, and her countrywoman swimming elegantly in leather pants.

When it comes to women, The Israelis are considered the most attractive. Latin Americans (“always”) and “Central Asians” also got high marks from a Scandinavian gentleman named Bjorn who said he enjoys the bar’s flourishing singles scene and dirt-cheap Heinekens, but does not enjoy having to spend his Saturday working on his delegation’s budget, though that was in his very near future. Bjorn told me that Scandinavian women deserve their reputation for beauty—an exception being those working here at the United Nations. In a perhaps-related disclosure, he has never had any success picking up women at the North Delegates’ lounge. Did his friend, another regular lounge-goer (“This is my second living room; I am the mayor”) who would only be identified as “Mohammed” for publication, have better luck?

Mohammed laughed. “I’m a good Muslim,” he said. “We don’t do that.” He crossed himself like a good Catholic, but in backward order. “Oh shit! I messed up.” No more quotes, please, he said. “My spokesperson is not here.”

His circumspection was prudent, if rare. Five years ago, as legend has it, a few young women snuck from the lounge into the adjoining Economic and Social Council late one night and took photos of themselves (which were later posted to the Internet) less-than-clothed in front of Egypt’s seat. After the incident, security barred the doors leading from the room to committee chambers. But now the doors are sometimes found open again for clandestine viewing, or ... interactions. “You haven’t really done it, until you’ve done it in the Security Council chamber behind China,” boasted one Dane to a visitor, making a thumbs-up motion.



New York on Fire at Dusk. Photo by Trey Ratcliff

Cliques at the North Delegates' Lounge aren't always tribal; they can be departmental, too. H.R. drinks with H.R., media employees with media employees. When groups did mingle, they spoke the international language of diplomacy: bureaucratese. *Do you take the M15 to work? Are you signed up for that internal newsletter?* Work gripes were aired, the details exotic but the underlying complaints commonplace. "I make better money there," said a public information officer, "but the problem is, I'm in Darfur."

At the bar, a woman of ambiguous and elegant European extraction asked the bartender (provided by Aramark, that ubiquitous purveyor of conference and campus food) why she couldn't have her wine in a glass. "When did this change?" she demanded. "A month ago." "Can I have my beer in a glass?" The answer was no. For the rowdier post-6 p.m. crowd: plastic-ware only.

Often, the DJ is a guy from UNICEF, but on one recent Friday, it was the turn of a young gentleman in a fitted navy Adidas shirt clutching a Red Bull in one hand and working a turntable with the other. He works for "security," he told me. The Security Council? "No. Security security." The following weekend, the talk of the bar was his department's hot-ticket holiday party in the cafeteria downstairs. It



was a \$25 cover charge and the lights were off. The security department apparently knows how to get down. The DJ went from Miley Cyrus to David Guetta's "Work Hard, Play Hard," and the beat dropped. Women in Banana Republic pencil skirts nodded along. Men in perfectly tailored suits sharked their eyes around, their thick tie knots, jackets with double vents, and extreme spread collars giving them away as likely not American; the orange and purple hues of their shirts further delineated them as Benelux (Belgium/Netherlands/Luxembourg), according to one fashion anthropologist. A woman, young and blonde and wearing a short feathery black dress and heavy eyeliner, black-swanned her way past. High-heeled Oxfords were her only nod to office wear. She was Israeli, apparently, and an object of great interest for a group of male regulars.



Re-Design North Delegates' Lounge UN Headquarters New York. Photo by Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Netherlands/ Frank Oudeman

The lounge was even more crowded when the weather was warmer, everyone said. According to one theory, that's because of its outdoor terrace looking out on a glittering East River skyline; another theory is that there are more interns in the



summer. Smoking—probably more common at the United Nations than elsewhere in post-Bloomberg New York—provides a ready opportunity for taking advantage of either. On a cold and rainy December night, however, only a few true addicts hunched under the building’s overhang. The head of I.T., a snub-nosed blond Argentine, was smoking alone, staring at the big red PEPSI-COLA twinkling in Long Island City, where his offices are located. He comes across the river every Friday to come to the Delegates’ Lounge. He’d been in the city too long, he said. “New York is like cocaine. Beautiful and bad for you.” He dropped his cigarette in a puddle and decided to light a new one.

It was almost ten, an hour till closing time. A few people lingered—an older man bought a round of Coronas, one of the circling sharks had finally caught a woman’s attentions. Someone else ordered wings and French fries. But mostly, it was backpacks on, trench coats buttoned. It was either a late night at work or a night out that ended early.

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