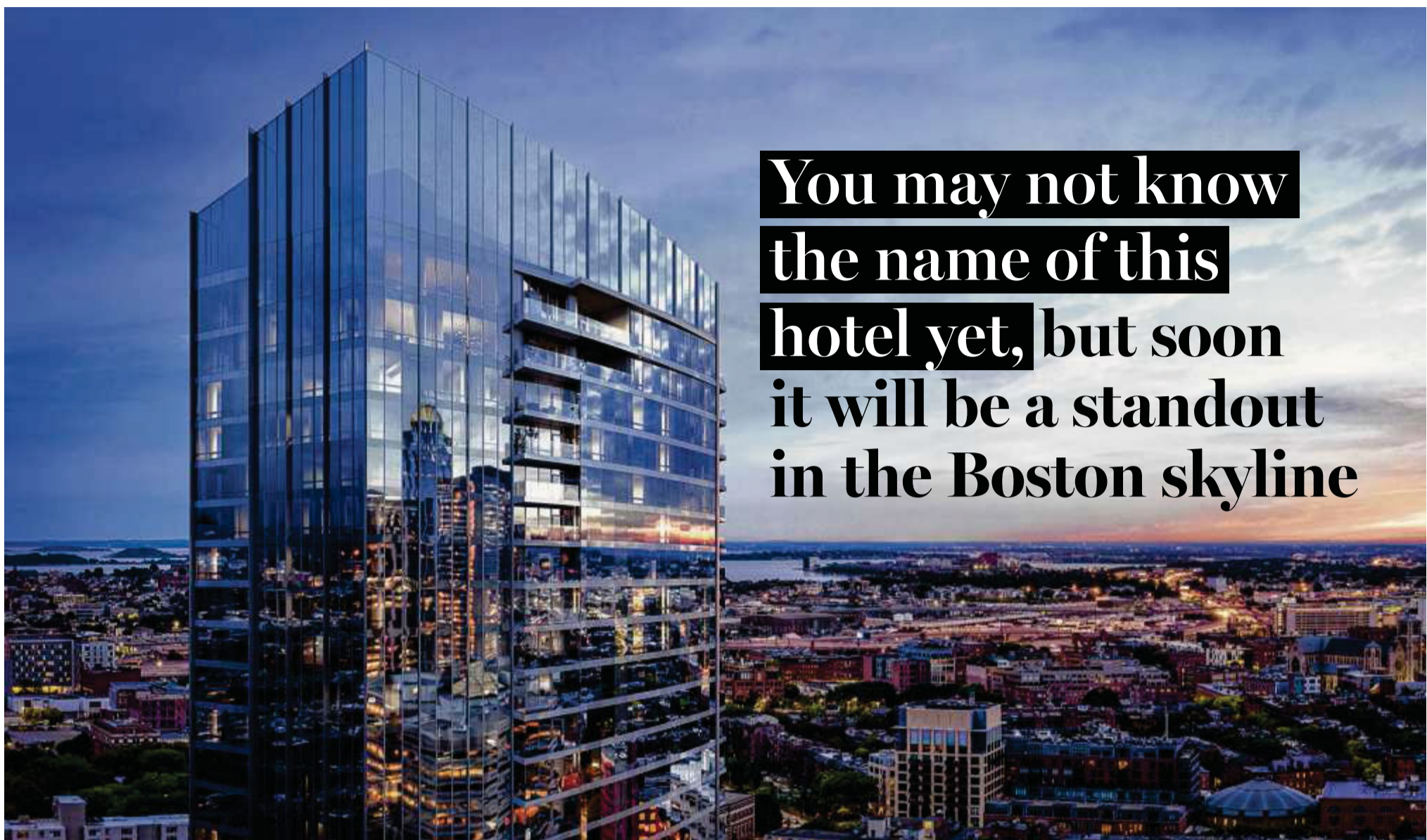


SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE APRIL 18, 2021 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL

You may not know the name of this hotel yet, but soon it will be a standout in the Boston skyline



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER



How did Raffles, a Singapore-based luxury hotel chain, come to choose Boston as the city where it will open its first North American property? For the sake of time, let's just say we can thank late Boston mayor Tom Menino for setting the process in motion.

The story goes something like this: In 2011 hotelier Gary Saunders and developer Jordan Warshaw purchased the former Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center in the Back Bay. At first they had modest aspirations for the hotel, which offered two-star accommodations in 64 rooms that were in desperate need of some love. At most, Saunders and Warshaw thought they might be able to add a couple of stories to the building, in addition to transforming it from run-down to remarkably opulent.

"When we started to renovate, we realized there were accessibility issues," Warshaw said. "The building wasn't at street level so you had to walk up six steps to get into it, so it didn't work from a handicapped standpoint, it didn't work from a seismic standpoint, and the elevators and stairwells were undersized. We realized that we were going to have to take it down and do something different."

After six months of trying to work with the existing 1925 structure, Saunders and



Renderings of Raffles Back Bay Hotel & Residences. The hotel is scheduled to open in 2022.

Warshaw met with Menino in 2012 to explain their dilemma.

"[Menino] literally said, 'Go up guys, go up. I want you to think big. We are going to be putting up 400-foot zoning here, and we should plan for that,'" Saunders recalled.

And that's exactly what they did. Fast-forward to 2021, and after years of zoning meetings and planning sessions — plus a pandemic — the modest Boston Common Hotel and Conference center will open next year as the grand 35-story Raffles Back Bay



BINYAN STUDIOS

Hotel & Residences, a world-class hotel that's on par with properties such as the Four Seasons. The name may not be familiar, but it will soon be towering over Boston.

The \$400 million project will include a 147-room hotel and 146 condominiums, plus fine dining, a lounge, a speakeasy, a Writers' Lounge, and a patisserie. It will also hold the distinction of having the largest hotel rooms in Boston (many of them suites).

Despite the lengthy process to bring the building at 430 Stuart St. to life, Saunders, a

third-generation hotelier whose portfolio includes the Lenox, and Warshaw, a Boston-based developer who founded the Noannet Group, say that they've never had as much fun on a project as they have working on Raffles.

"Because Jordan has never had such a big budget on a project before," Saunders joked.

Originally Saunders and Warshaw's hotel was intended to be an independent brand, likely falling under the umbrella of the Saun-

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All is not lost at The Lost Kitchen, as chef Erin French adjusts and reinvents, yet again

By Anna Fiorentino
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

FREEDOM, Maine — Erin French takes a seat at the head of an empty table that fills her tiny cabin along with the smell of fresh pine. "Last year we were set up to have the best year ever, so I bought this table — a real piece of furniture — for my own house," says French. "Then COVID hit and I said, 'Oh, that's going to the cabin.'"

She tells me everything's riding on this tiny house and two more tucked a stone's throw away along a pond in the woods of Maine, since her world-renowned 44-seat restaurant, named one of Time Magazine's Greatest Places in 2018, hasn't reopened in COVID. Private cabin dining will start this spring, and eventually transition into overnight glamping, as part of French's COVID plan to keep business going. Over the past year, outdoor patio lunches and a few dinners, and popular farmer's and online markets have also kept her afloat. The Lost Kitchen will eventually reopen seasonally to diners all over the globe — by postcard reservation lottery as always — in the old mill across the pond here in French's hometown of Freedom, population 722.

Her bottom line may be down 86 percent since early last year, but things are starting to look up all over again for French, who's no

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ANNA SOLO

Erin French stands in front of one of the dining cabins that will be used to host small groups at The Lost Kitchen.

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THE VIP LOUNGE FROM RUSSIA WITH EAR PLUGS

Journalist Chris Wallace enjoys St. Petersburg, Moscow, and a good night's sleep
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RENTAL CARS TAKING OFF EVERYWHERE

Why your next option for ground transportation might cost more than a plane ticket
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Eat, drink, read, swim, nap, repeat: Island camping at Lake George for 60 years

By Jean Duffy
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

I emerge with caution from my pandemic hibernation. My husband and I contemplate the annual family summer vacation: "Most all of the family should be vaccinated by then. We'll be outside. I can't imagine a safer venue." I dare to dream of returning once again to our favorite spot with our car packed and two kayaks secured to the roof rack.

My extended family has camped on the islands of Lake George every summer for more than 60 years. The three eldest who will once again roll out their



MARK DUFFY

Setting up a canvas tent in the 1950s.

CAMPING, Page N14

By Hannah Sampson
THE WASHINGTON POST

Chris Fore was taking all the steps to make his family's first trip to Hawaii in July affordable: using credit card points for plane tickets, staying in a timeshare, and bargain-hunting for a rental car months in advance.

That's where his plans hit a snag.

"I usually shop the heck out of things for the best deals," said Fore, a high school principal from Apple Valley, Calif. "And now I'm regretting not pulling a trigger on a rental car back in November."

Back then, the prices for an SUV or van were a little higher than his \$700 budget for the 10-day trip with his family of five. Now he's finding options closer to \$1,600.

Fore is not an outlier in his struggle. As millions more Americans get vaccinated against COVID every week — and millions take to the skies — demand for travel is skyrocketing.

That growing interest is running smack into a dearth of vehicles after rental car companies shed hundreds of thousands of their cars during the earlier days of the pandemic. And in many cases, the cars that are available are extremely expensive.

"Essentially this is really just kind of an extreme example of supply and demand," said Chris Woronka, a leisure analyst at Deutsche Bank who follows rental car companies.

It is an unusual starring role for rental cars, which typically don't command that much of a traveler's attention — or budget.

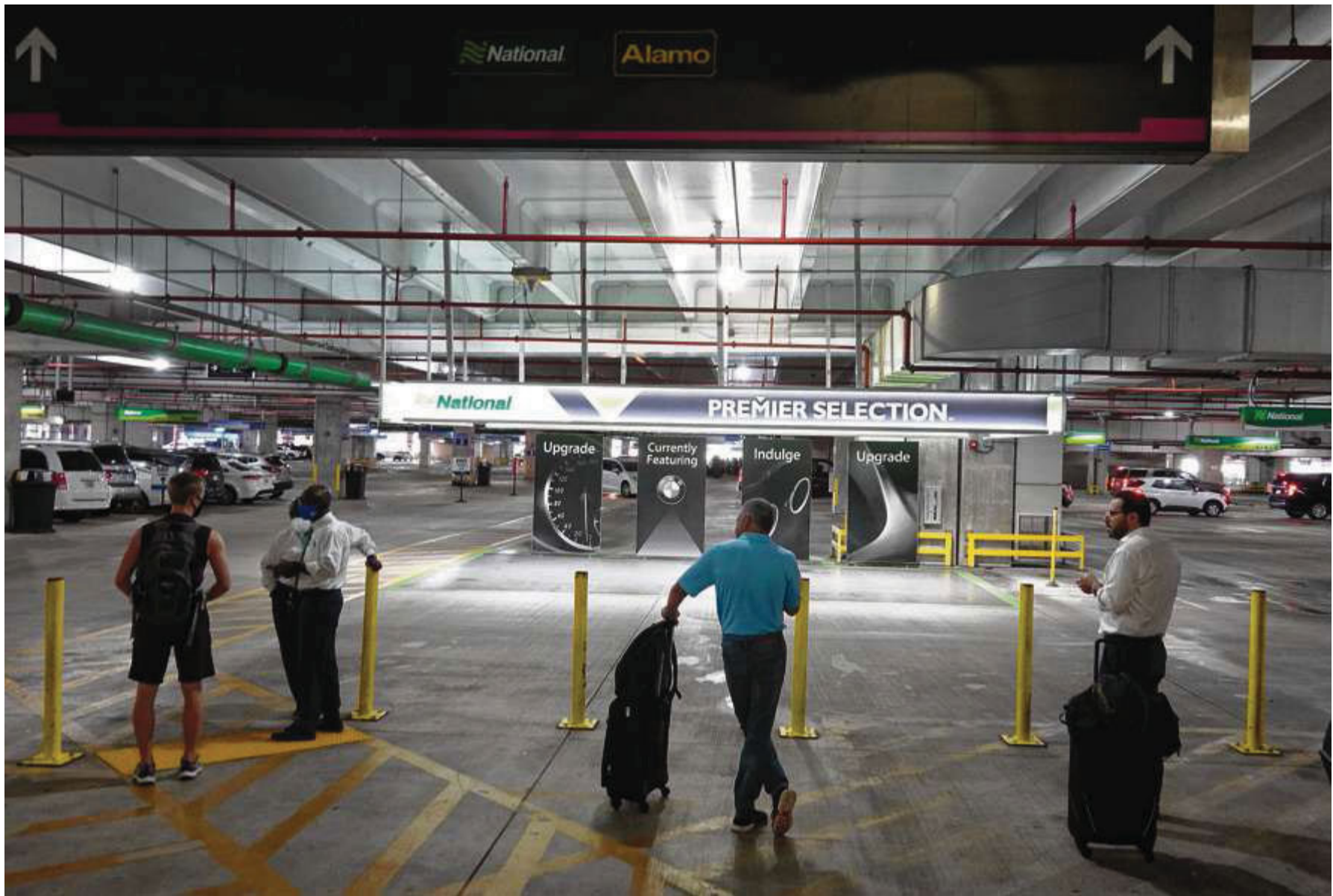
"People would book their airfare and they would book their hotel and then they'd book their car rental whenever they got around to it," said Jonathan Weinberg, founder and CEO of car rental site AutoSlash. "If you do that, you're going to be left standing when the music stops."

The problem has been especially prevalent this spring in warm-weather destinations including Florida, Texas, California, Arizona, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, experts say. Social media posts reveal fruitless searches, exorbitant prices, and photos of long lines of people waiting for vehicles.

Representatives for Hertz Corp. and Avis Budget Group did not respond to questions, but a spokeswoman for Enterprise Holdings said in a statement that the company is seeing upticks in bookings in the spring and summer.

"We anticipate this continuing throughout the coming months, especially in pockets of the country popular with travelers," spokeswoman Lisa Martini said in the statement. She added that vehicle supply is a challenge because of a global shortage of semiconductor chips that is holding up auto production.

"We are working closely with our manufacturing partners to continue to add vehicles to our fleet to meet the demand," Martini said. "We also are leveraging our large network of neighborhood and airport locations to move vehicles where possible to support regional spikes in demand."



JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

People wait in line at National rental agency in the Miami International Airport Car Rental Center on April 12, in Miami. Customers are finding that car rental agencies have limited or no supply of vehicles as people begin traveling again after being locked down during the pandemic.

Why your next rental car might cost more than a plane ticket

Woronka said moving vehicles around is expensive and time-consuming for the rental car companies, and the chip shortage is making it difficult to rebuild fleets economically. He said there are still unknowns about how the situation will eventually be resolved, but he doesn't expect a very quick fix.

"I am not overly optimistic that we are going to have all the rental cars we need for peak summer travel season," he said.

Weinberg said he expects to start seeing shortages in other areas as summer approaches, especially near national parks. In those cases, he said, it might be necessary to rent a car farther from the attraction and include a longer road trip into the vacation.

He said he has already heard stories of people who have canceled entire trips because they couldn't get a car.

"I think that folks are saying, 'It's great that I got this \$50 airfare, but the rental car is going to cost me 10 times as much,'" he said.

Jake Ekhaml, an accountant from St.

Paul, Minn., said he thought he and a friend would have a "super cheap last-minute trip" to go fishing in Panama City Beach, Fla. They had a free place to stay and decided to book an inexpensive flight to New Orleans, then rent a car and drive to the Florida beach town on Saturday.

Ekhaml's friend thought he found a car for \$400 or \$500 but wasn't able to confirm the rental. Ekhaml finally found one and booked it — he thinks — for about \$750.

"If we get there and we don't get a car, we'll just stay in New Orleans," he said.

Even for non-beach destinations, George Quinn, 50, of Hallandale Beach, Fla., said he's noticed a pattern: In three trips he's booked since last fall — to Dallas, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati — the cost of a car for three or four days has been more than the plane ticket. Shortly before the Cincinnati trip this week, he saw that the price for a car had jumped from \$207 to more than \$375.

Quinn said he always uses a site that compares prices across multiple compa-

nies, and then goes to their websites directly to check. His advice: "Book early and just keep checking. You can always cancel without any kind of penalty and rebook."

Weinberg recommends that people make speculative bookings: If they're not sure exactly when they want to go on vacation, they should search in the area they plan to visit and book rentals for multiple dates. Especially in a scenario like this, "pay later" rates instead of prepaid bookings will allow for the flexibility to cancel without a penalty.

While Weinberg hesitates to suggest making several reservations on the same date, he said if someone knows they will absolutely need a car — and worries that one won't be available when they arrive — it might not hurt to have a backup reservation.

His company has also found that sometimes companies that don't show availability for a weekend rental will have cars to rent for a longer period of time. So he recommends expanding a search to include more days in case that

reveals more options. In "most cases," he said, car rental companies will offer a credit if customers return the vehicle early.

Chris Fore, the California principal, got some suggestions after he tweeted about his plight. Someone shared a photo of a friend who had rented a U-Haul truck in Hawaii to get around.

"I'm not going to do that," Fore said. "But we are just looking at some other options."

One of them: Turo, a car-sharing company that lets owners rent out their vehicles.

The company has seen its business increase as the demand for cars intensifies.

"We've noticed that the rental car crunch is turbocharging the economic empowerment of people building small businesses on Turo," CEO Andre Haddad said in a statement. "Our hosts are telling us that their businesses are booming due to the surge in travel and sky-high rental car prices, and even as they add cars, demand outpaces them."



Raffles aims to make a splash in Back Bay

►MUTHER
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ders Hotel Group. But realizing the opportunity they had with the size of the building and its prime location, they opted to look for a partner. That's when the largest hotel companies in the United States came calling. They had meetings with executives from Hilton, Marriott, and others. But they were most impressed with Accor, the parent company of Raffles, despite the fact that Raffles wouldn't have the same name recognition in this country as other brands.

"The only weakness was that we would have to explain to people what Raffles is," Warshaw said. "On the other hand, it's an opportunity because people would learn about it."

For the uninitiated, here's a cheat sheet about the hotel chain: Raffles opened in Singapore in 1887 and was

named for British statesman Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of colonial-era Singapore. Perhaps more importantly, its bar was where the cocktail the Singapore Sling was invented. In the movie "Crazy Rich Asians," it's where movie Nick (Henry Golden) and Rachel (Constance Wu) stayed when they arrived in Singapore. Currently, the chain operates 15 locations, including properties in Paris, Istanbul, Dubai, Warsaw, Jakarta, and the Seychelles.

According to the design team for Raffles Back Bay, the challenge was creating a building that was unique, but would not feel out of place here. It also needed to complement (and stand out against) the nearby John Hancock Tower, which is 62 stories tall. The nearby Four Season One Dalton is 61 stories.

The interior needed to meet the same challenges.

"In this instance we started to take



BINYAN STUDIOS (LEFT); STONEHILL TAYLOR

Renderings of the Sky Lobby Fine Dining Restaurant (above) and the new hotel's entrance (left).

inspiration from Boston's heritage of the famed Emerald Necklace," said Greg Heffer, from the Rockwell Group, which designed interior spaces in the residences. "We also wanted to take reference from the Back Bay and the stately Victorian brownstones that we see there. Some of the color palettes and material draws upon not only that, but also the landscape, the greens and the blues and the pale grays."

The Emerald Necklace theme starts at the street-level entrance, but might be lost on those headed directly to the patisserie.

Those subtle associations with the

city might be difficult to spot to those who work outside of the design world, but there are some details that are hard to miss. Check-in for hotel guests takes place in the Sky Lobby, which occupies the 17th, 18th, and 19th floors, and sports a hanging garden and a grand staircase. From that vantage point, the restaurants and bars located off the lobby will offer stunning views of the city. From the Sky Terrace Lounge, patrons can sip cocktails with views of the South End. In the intimate Sky Lobby Fine Dining Restaurant, the views feature the Back Bay, Charles River, and Cambridge.

The hotel and residences are scheduled to open in late 2022. If you happen to be sipping a Singapore Sling in the Sky Terrace Lounge or enjoying a glass of bourbon in the Writers' Lounge, don't forget to raise a glass and say a toast to Tom Menino. If he hadn't encouraged Saunders and Warshaw to "think big," there's a very good chance there wouldn't be a Sky Terrace Lounge, or even a Raffles in Boston.

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