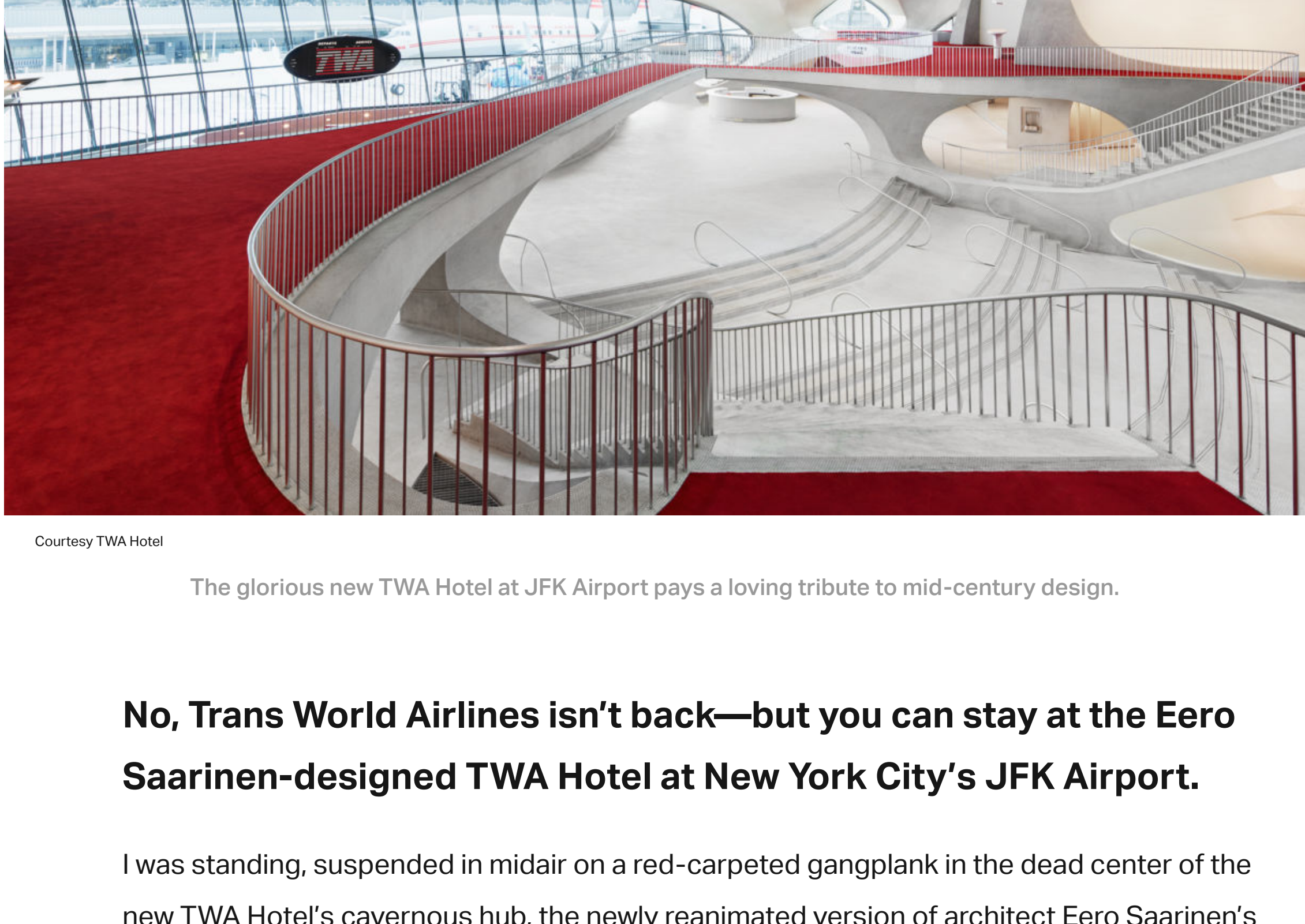


GET INSPIRED

New TWA Hotel at JFK Airport: What It Feels Like to Visit

3:42 PM — By Jamie Beckman



No, Trans World Airlines isn't back—but you can stay at the Eero Saarinen-designed TWA Hotel at New York City's JFK Airport.

I was standing, suspended in midair on a red-carpeted gangplank in the dead center of the new TWA Hotel's cavernous hub, the newly reanimated version of architect Eero Saarinen's 1962 midcentury *aeronautic* wonderland, when the full force of his design hit me: The vertigo kicked in.

The sensation of peering down from the uppermost peak of the catwalk, high above other travelers relaxing in the glamorous, oft-photographed rouge-carpeted Sunken Lounge, transmits a godlike feeling to anyone who dares perch there. It's best described as a cross between "I can't believe they let me up here" awe and healthy "I should come down now" fear.

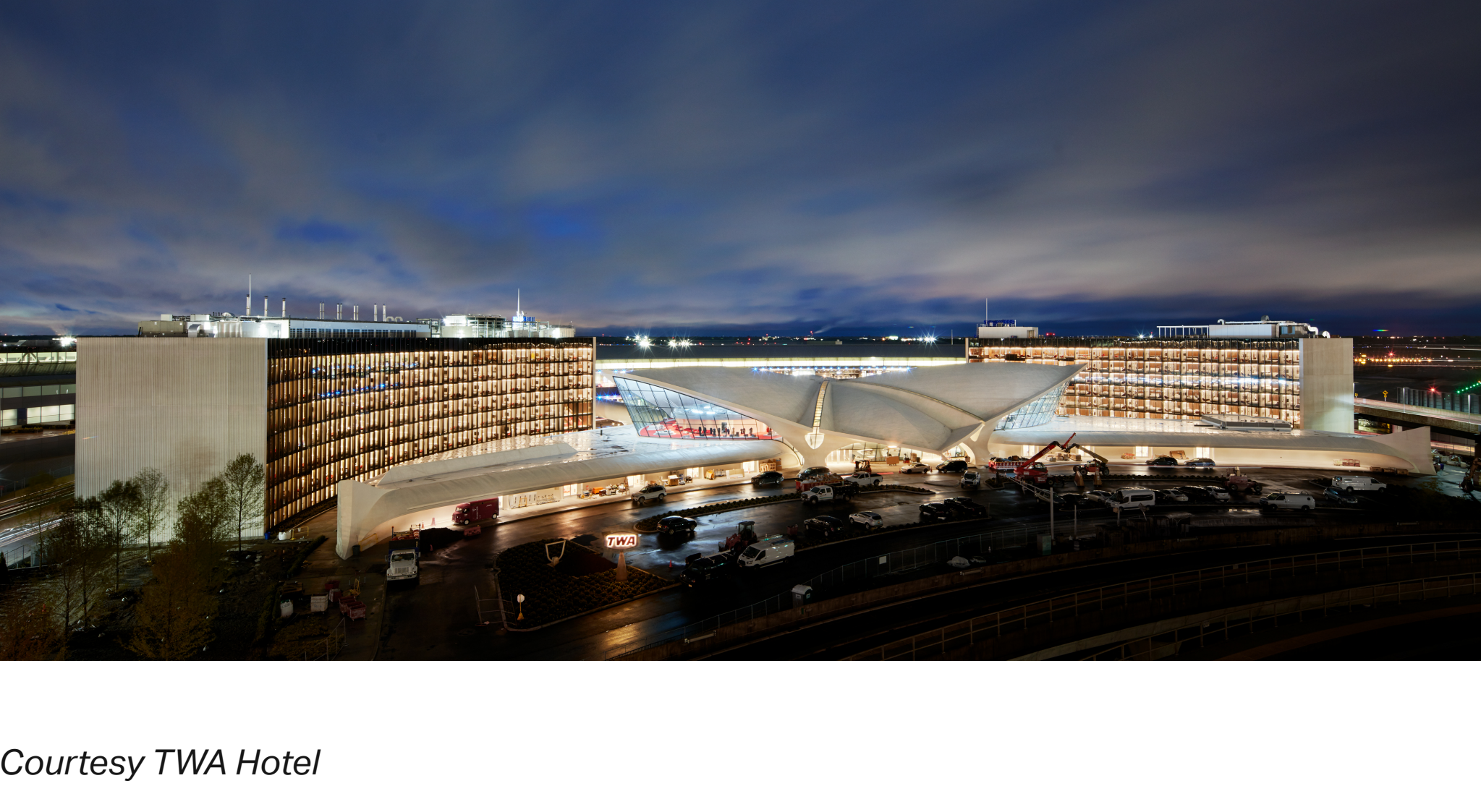
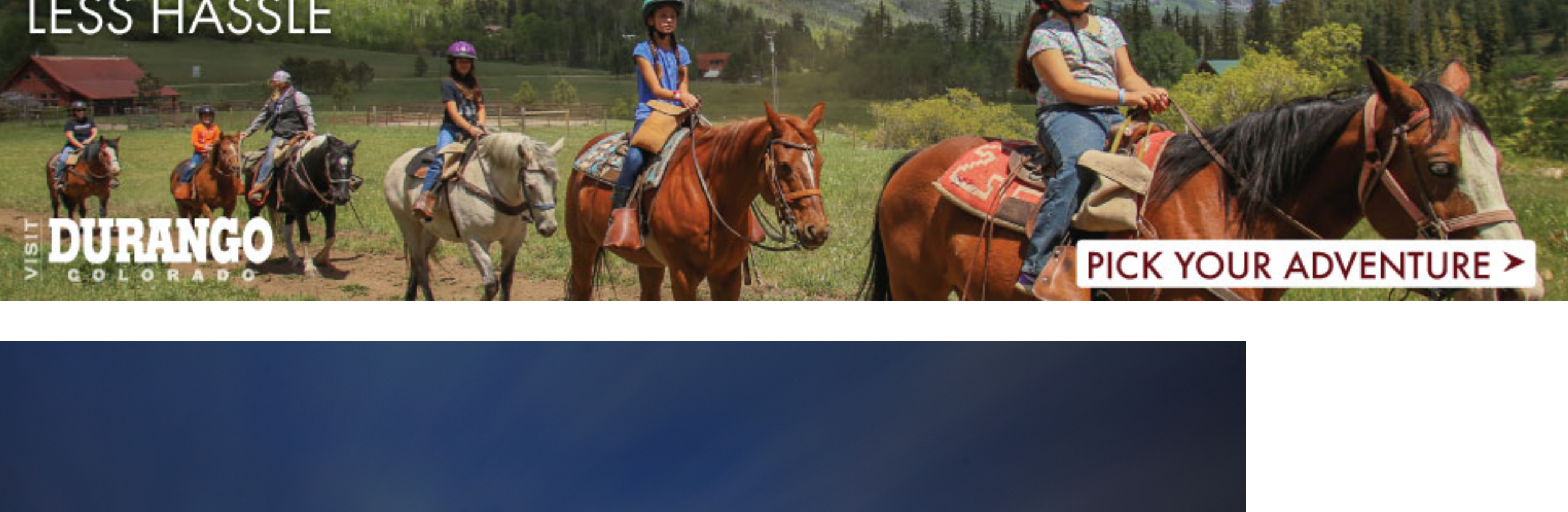
It's dizzying. And therein lies the genius of Eero Saarinen.

What Was the TWA Hotel Originally?

Designed to resemble a winged bird, Saarinen's majestic, blinding-white, red-accented, super-'60s love letter to aviation wasn't just for show: From 1962 to 2001, this modernist palace was wholly functional, as an airport terminal for Trans World Airlines at New York City's John F. Kennedy Airport (originally called Idlewild Airport until it was renamed in 1963). After TWA shuttered the building in 2001, the whole cantilevered clamshell-like landmark structure was in danger of falling into neglect, but a series of preservation and repair measures prevented that from happening.

Almost two decades later, after a joint Herculean effort from MCR/Morse Development hotel owner/operators, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, JetBlue, Beyer Blinder Belle Architects, the Gerber Group, and many others, Saarinen's Jet Age masterpiece has been brought back to life—this time as an airport hotel, with a rooftop infinity pool and a mall-like, commerce-and-cocktails-heavy "hub" in place of a working airline terminal.

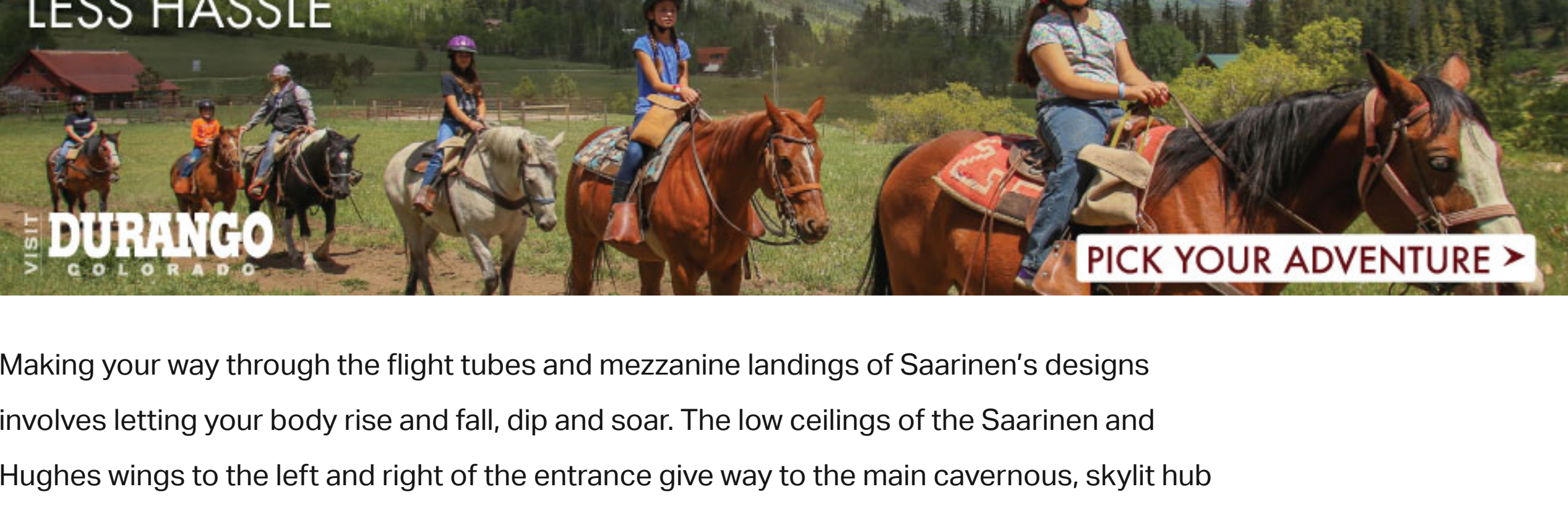
To the left of the entrance, former TWA ticket counters now function as hotel reservation desks, with several of them dedicated to renting out Blade helicopter rides to Manhattan. To the right, the ticket counters are food hall stands. Restaurants, sleek shops, coffee bars, and cocktail lounges—along with several amusing touches, such as replicas of Howard Hughes' and Saarinen's offices—populate the rest of the structure.



Courtesy TWA Hotel

Eero Saarinen's Original TWA Design

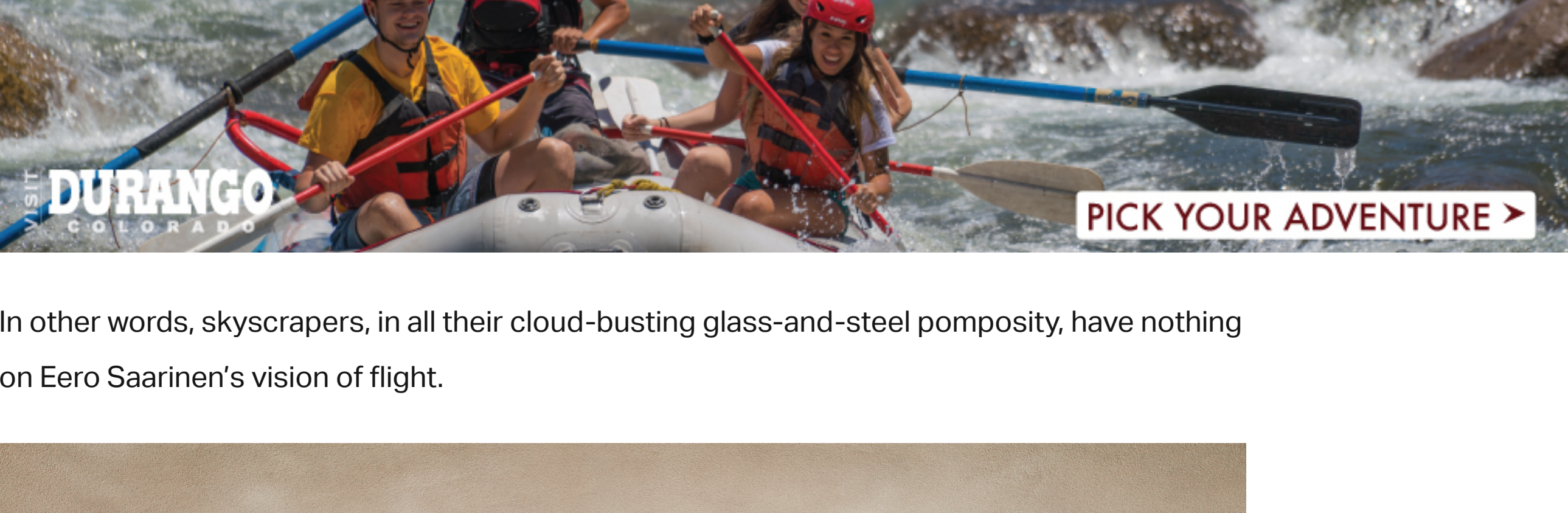
Say what you will about the changes, but the new TWA Hotel's near-slavish deference to the past is alive and well. So evident is the painstaking restoration of Saarinen's boundary-pushing architecture that you can feel the Jet Age energy in your bones. On opening day, I certainly did.



Making your way through the flight tubes and mezzanine landings of Saarinen's designs involves letting your body rise and fall, dip and soar. The low ceilings of the Saarinen and Hughes wings to the left and right of the entrance give way to the main cavernous, skylit hub with multiple sinewy levels connected by grand staircases. A catwalk slashes precariously through the center, the whole beautiful architecture sundae topped with an analog clock as the cherry.

Ascending a flight of stairs next to a constantly chattering wooden split-flap departures board — housed in a Jetsons-style oval, flashing red and green, and flip-flipping to dream destinations like Basel and Nairobi — brings you closer to descending into the famous Sunken Lounge, where a sheet of towering black-framed windows leans away from the iconic curvy red banquettes.

Ducking into eggshell-textured tunnels and following the smooth perimeter of the massive structure can induce nerve-jangling disequilibrium. There are no right angles in this space, which makes every vignette look as though it was shot through a fish-eye lens.



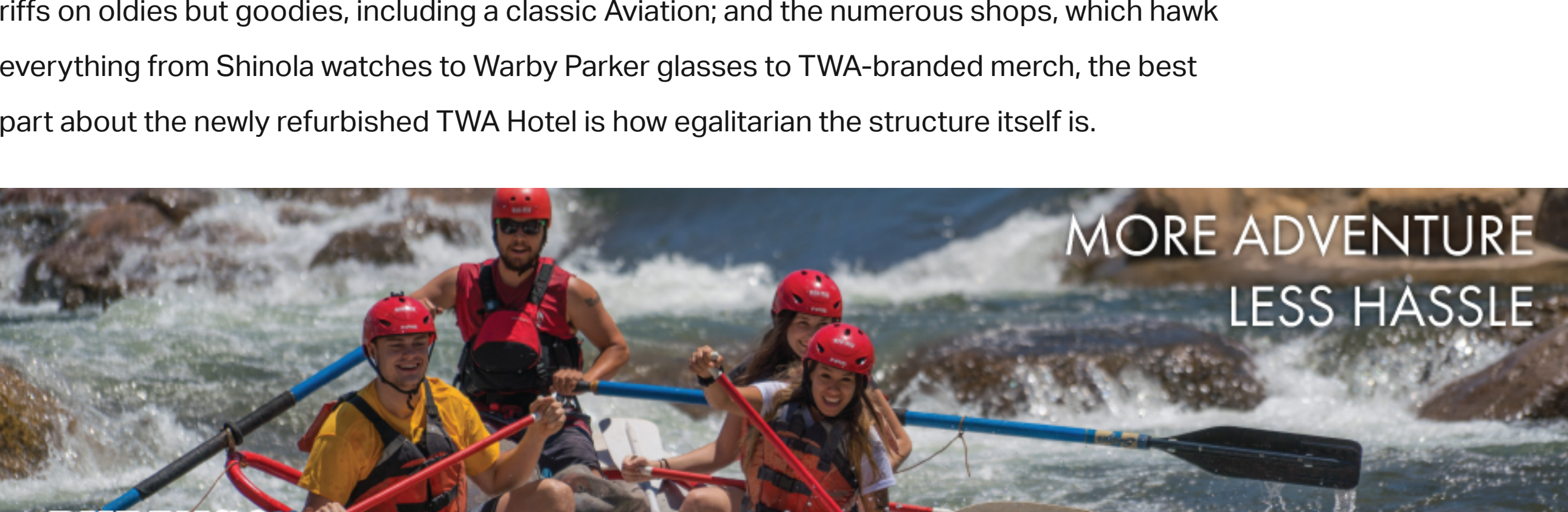
In other words, skyscrapers, in all their cloud-busting glass-and-steel pomposity, have nothing on Eero Saarinen's vision of flight.



Courtesy TWA Hotel

Who Can Go Inside the TWA Building? Everyone, Basically.

Despite the not-exactly-cheap hotel rooms, from which one can see planes taking off through soundproof windows; the prices of the TWA swizzle stick-festooned cocktails, which include riffs on oldies but goodies, including a classic Aviation; and the numerous shops, which hawk everything from Shinola watches to Warby Parker glasses to TWA-branded merch, the best part about the newly refurbished TWA Hotel is how egalitarian the structure itself is.



Anyone who flies into New York City's JFK Airport or [hops on the subway](#) and forks over the mere \$5 for an Airtrain ticket can go up and stand at the very point that I did and play god—or Saarinen, as it were. But if you're an aviation geek or if you really like being on time for your flights, staying in the hotel couldn't be more convenient to JFK, and the allure of watching the planes ascend from the comfort of your room is a draw that might be worth the price.

Viewing the vintage TWA air hostess uniforms displayed on mannequins on the mezzanine level costs nothing. Making a call on the throwback rotary pay phones will run you a dime (if that). Unabashedly geeking out about aviation, design, or how the space compares with [Mad Men's Season 7 TWA-themed promo images](#) is always free of charge.

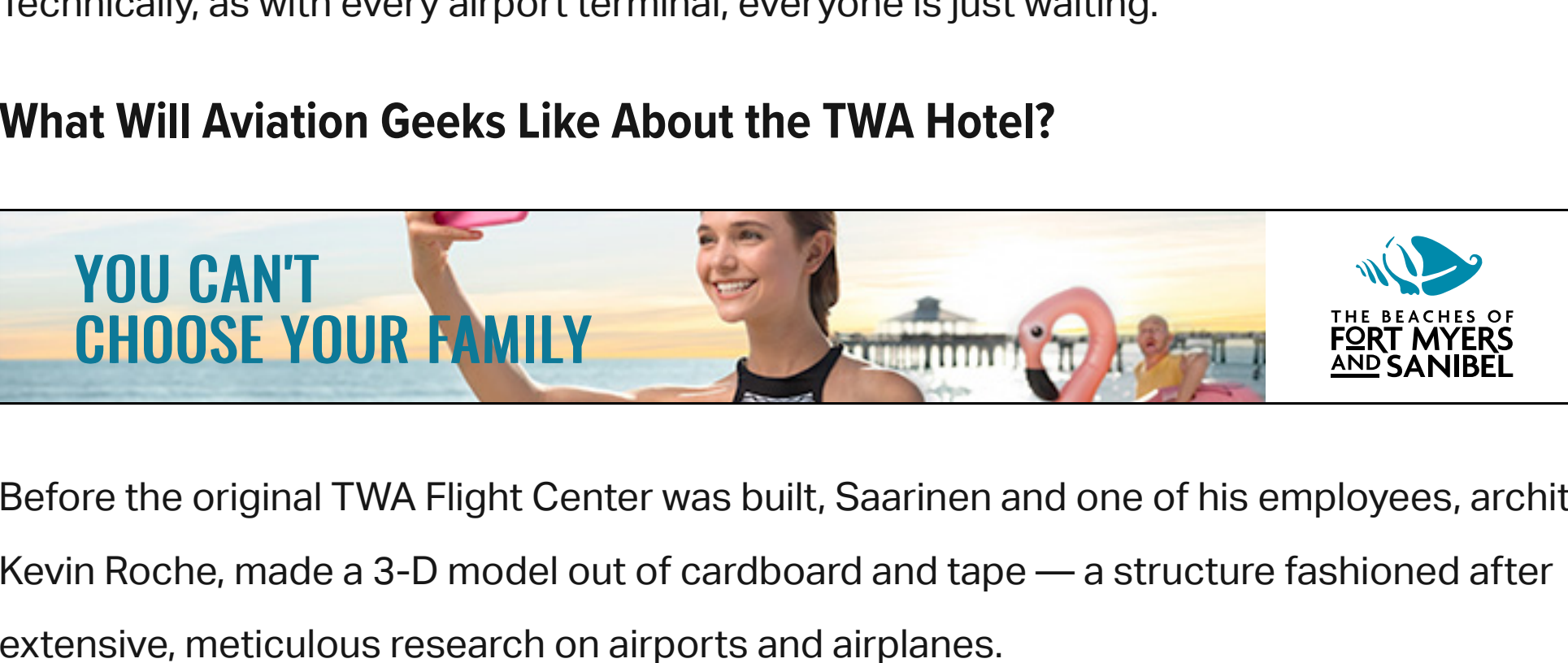
Are there \$16 cocktails? Yes. Is the Jean-Georges Paris Café guarded by three employees ready to bounce you out if you don't have a reservation, like they did me? Yes.



But the travelers sitting on tulip stools and banquettes in the Sunken Lounge and above it, on the balconies, aren't all partaking in witty repartee over \$20 Sunken Lounge Martinis (served with TWA flight wings). Some are eating plastic-bagged halal food they bought in the Hughes Wing, which is really just a long tunnel filled with decent takeout. Some are JetBlue customers killing time in Terminal 5.

Technically, as with every airport terminal, everyone is just waiting.

What Will Aviation Geeks Like About the TWA Hotel?

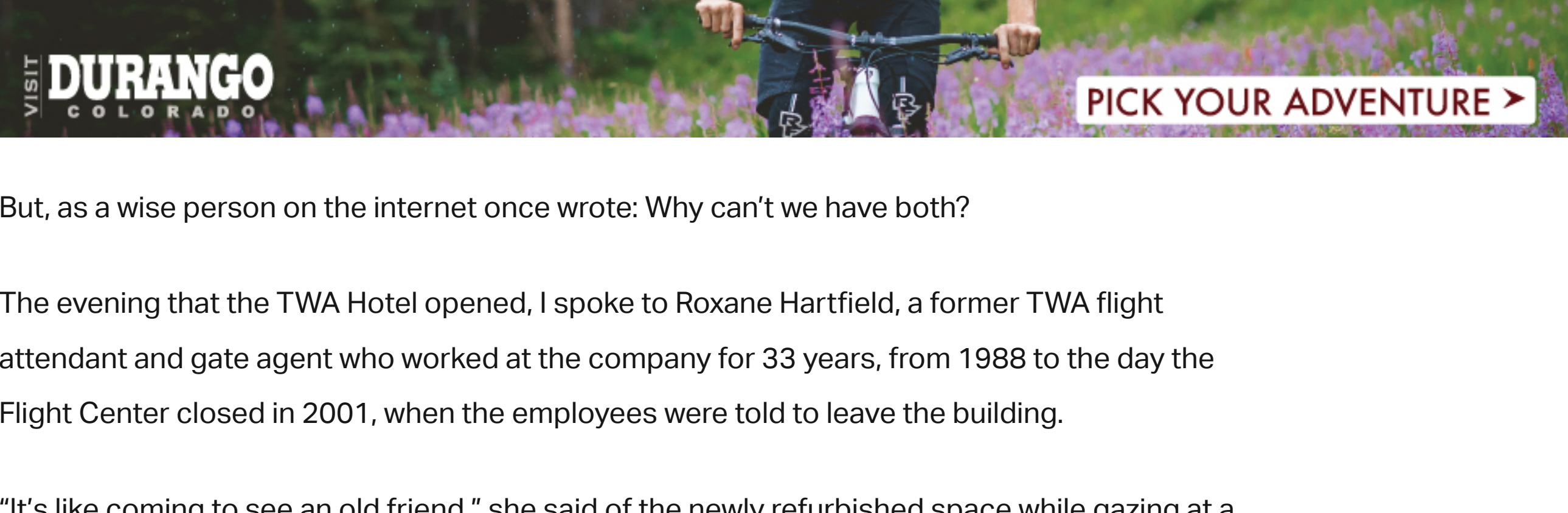


Before the original TWA Flight Center was built, Saarinen and one of his employees, architect Kevin Roche, made a 3-D model out of cardboard and tape — a structure fashioned after extensive, meticulous research on airports and airplanes.

"He was interested in the pragmatic aspects: how long it took a plane to taxi; where passengers arrived; how long they spent at the ticket counter," Roche told [Metropolis magazine](#). "When we traveled, Eero went around with a stopwatch, measuring everything: 'This took four seconds more than last time.' Of course, I was just waiting for the goddamn plane to take off so I could get a martini."

There is perhaps no better metaphor for the new TWA Hotel, an oasis of majestic design with an ocean of booze lapping at its edges. A total of five bars are on property. There's even a wet bar retrofitted into the back of a (stationary) 1958 Lockheed Constellation L-1649A directly outside, the cockpit left intact so you can "fly" the plane tipsy. As viewed from the mezzanine balconies, two circular bars rising up from the floor look like life preservers.

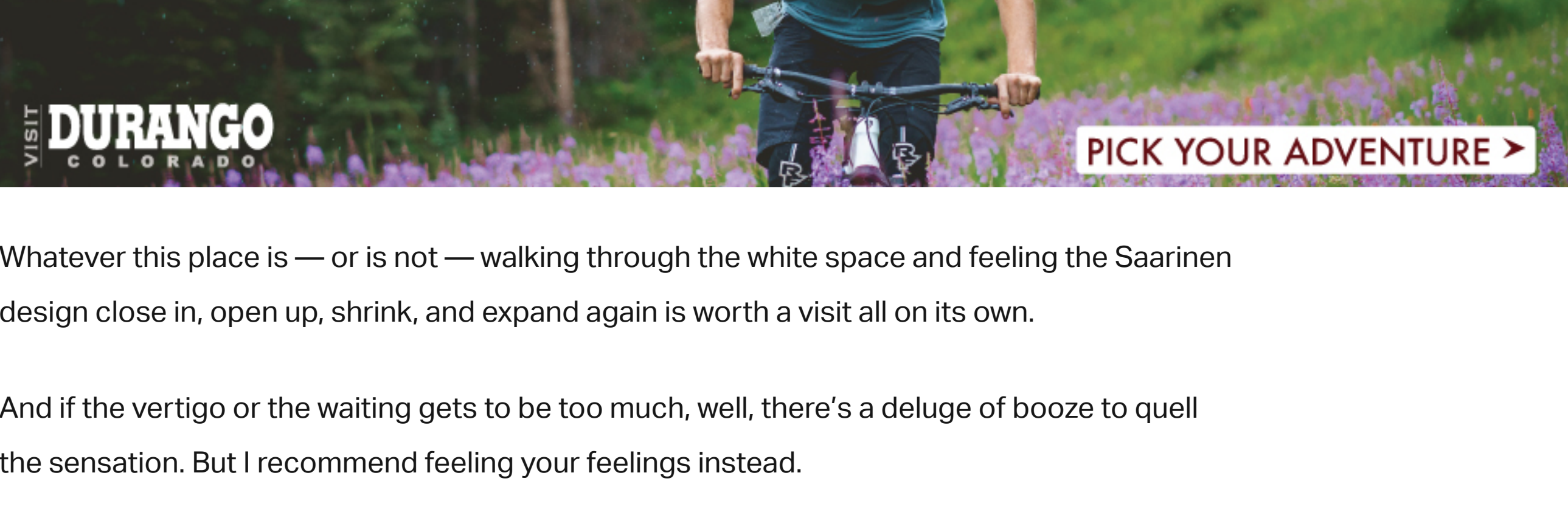
Depending on one's perspective, the hotel's entire concept could be art or commerce: an ode to architecture and a great excuse to make a Don Draper reference (yes, there are old fashioned on the menu, but the ashtrays of yore are long gone), or a bastardization of the space's intended utility—a ghost in the shell.



But, as a wise person on the internet once wrote: Why can't we have both?

The evening that the TWA Hotel opened, I spoke to Roxane Hartfield, a former TWA flight attendant and gate agent who worked at the company for 33 years, from 1988 to the day the Flight Center closed in 2001, when the employees were told to leave the building.

"It's like coming to see an old friend," she said of the newly refurbished space while gazing at a vintage TWA photograph and holding a full martini with lemon twist. "It's like coming to a part of life that's in a particular corner that you never thought you'd see again, and here I am."



Whatever this place is — or is not — walking through the white space and feeling the Saarinen design close in, open up, shrink, and expand again is worth a visit all on its own.

And if the vertigo or the waiting gets to be too much, well, there's a deluge of booze to quell the sensation. But I recommend feeling your feelings instead.

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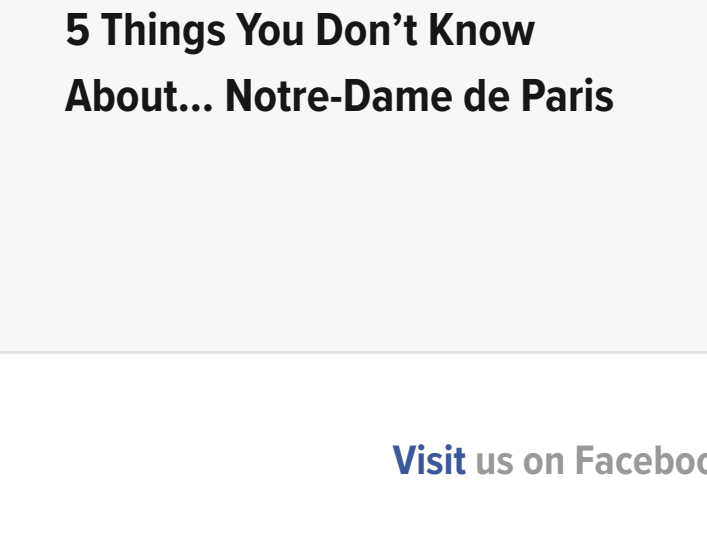
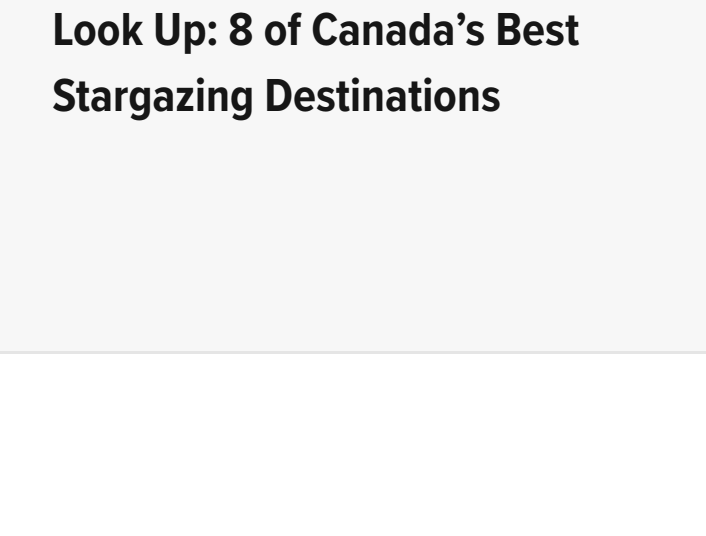
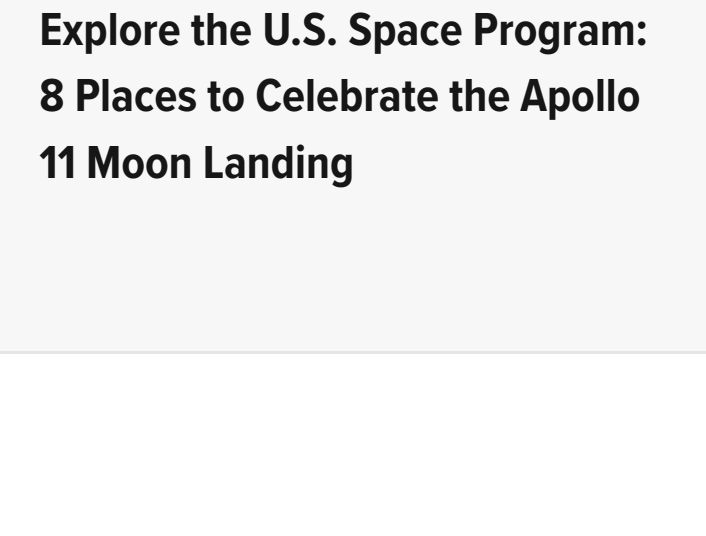
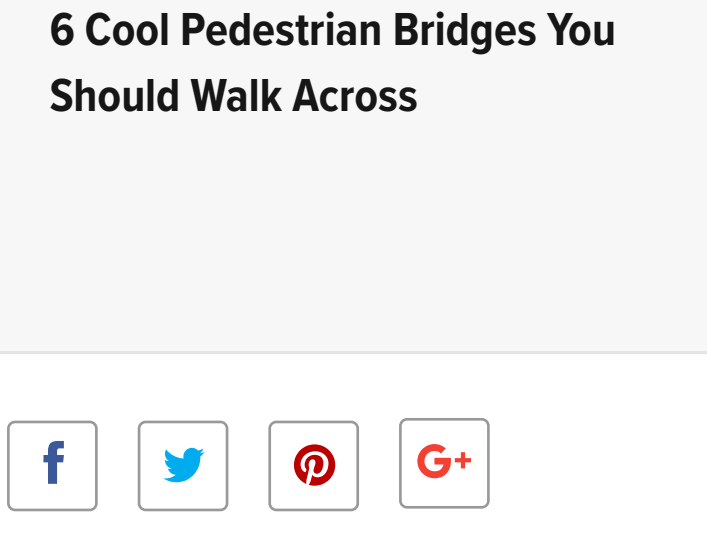
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