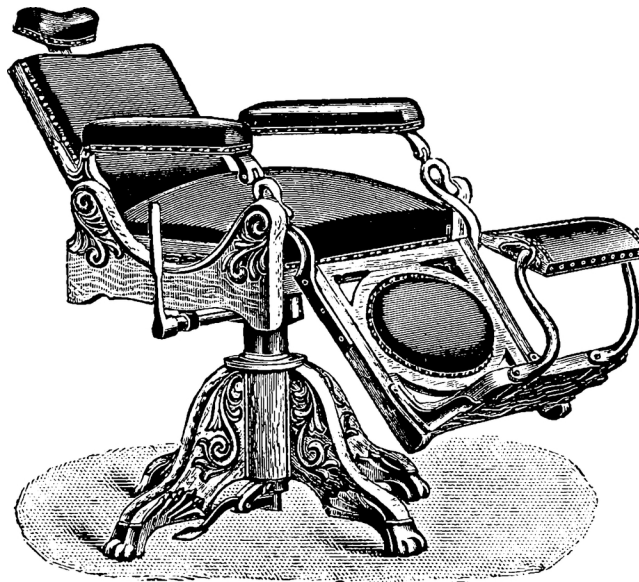


THE BARBER CHAIR

By H. Wesley Bryant



The male hiding places of the pub and the man cave, and even the adrenaline rush of contact sports has been encroached upon by gender equality. Where is a man to go when his inhibitions request a break? Where can he go to release the pressures of life? Is this basic need of the male species, to escape, to spend time with his own gender, or to gather his thoughts so he can face the world again, being stolen away?

Maybe the return of the barber chair has a purpose not recognized by most. Perhaps its return is not just a hipster fad. Could it be the last bastion of male escape?

I decided to take a journey through the chairs of a few of these retro fit outs, to see what it's all about.

A trend that started about a decade ago has grown into a world-wide phenomenon. The return of the traditional barber chair is accompanied by the hot-towel, straight blade shave, the barber pole, the entertaining snip-snip of the scissors, and of course, a man trained in the tensorial art.

I'm pretty lazy when it comes to shaving, usually scraping off the bristles as best I can in the shower, so I thought a professional touch would be a nice change – perhaps even more for those who have to look at my face.

I happened to be in Malaysia when my theory of the “barber chair” developed into an action plan. My first stop was The Kingsman Barber, located in the Hilton complex in Kuala Lumpur. Patrick, a co-owner with two others, was enthusiastic when I explained my reason for visiting his outfit.

“That’s cool!” he said. “I will introduce you to Joseph and tell him what you are here for, You will be happy with his work.”

Joseph took an interest in my journey and soon took to his tools. He sat me in the retro barber chair. I told him this was my first experience, and what I would like him to do. He started with the clippers, and with polished technique he carefully trimmed the beard length back to a close number-one cut. He trimmed

my eyebrows (missed at my last haircut), then with his fingertip he applied a pre-shave cream to the clean-shaven areas of my face. He then reclined the chair and asked if I was comfortable.

Again with his fingertip he applied a mint gel that refreshed my skin, with a cool sensation that lasted for minutes. With a warning, he then gently folded a hot towel over my face, explaining that this would soften my beard in preparation for the fine blade. I drifted blissfully away to the music of The Beatles and Cat Stevens playing in the background.

Joseph gently interrupted my sleep and removed the now tepid towel. Commencing with his straight razor near my right ear, in style and precision he moved around my head. With a light finger touch, now and again he would indicate that I needed to shift my head slightly one way or another.

He then raised my chin with my forehead back and my neck vulnerable to his sharp razor. I could not help but think of the barber shop scene in *Mississippi Burning*, so easily the razor could slice through an artery. I had to peek and make sure Joseph was still in charge of that blade.

Once finished with the razor he gave a final run around with the electric trimmer to tidy up the edge of my beard.

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Next stop – Melbourne, Australia. I emailed Mario before leaving KL, explaining the purpose of my upcoming visit. Mario opened his “New York Barber” in 2014, and had recently moved to a larger shop.

Several weeks after my email, I was sitting in one of the New York Barber chairs, with Mario at the helm. While he took to my face in a very similar manner to Joseph, Mario spoke of his reasons for opening the “hipster” barber shop.

“It’s all about service – giving men a hair style service that is tailored to them.” He explained that it’s unusual for general fashion and style to come together with hair in the same movement. But this seems to be the case with the return of the “old barber shop.”

Mario also mentors apprentices and trains all of his barbers himself. His selection is from both raw talent and previous hairdressers. He said, “My selection of people has a slant towards entrepreneurial potential. This gives my barbers an ownership mentality. They therefore take pride in their work and service.”

It seems it’s all about business for Mario.

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It must have been the “America” in the New York-named barbershop that led me to make San Francisco my next destination. Before leaving for California, I found there were plenty of barbers to choose from on the “most popular” list from Google, no need to book ahead. I thought. Once I was there, however, I had only one day set aside for this Bay Area adventure.

A few phone calls before I set out in this famous city should lock in an appointment with another craftsman with a blade. Oops, the first call was answered by a girl! What? This is a man’s domain.

Okay, let's keep trying. My next call was answered by Cedric. He sounded good but he was booked out for three weeks. "Call my partner Jason," he told me. "He's at our other shop we just opened and might be able to fit you in."

No, nor did any of Jason's barbers. After several other calls I decided to hit the big city and look for one. If I just walked in, they might make time for me, Or so I thought.

Several hours and four shops later, I entered Joe's Barber Shop. Yep! Joe could fit me in. After signing into his iPad, he said, "Great! You're in. Just take a seat and Corrina will be with you in about ten minutes."

Corrina?

Is it time for men to give up? Maybe not. The female gender has always had a role to play in a man's escape. The art and skill of barbering dates back to the Roman Empire, but women playing the part in a man's hiding place, in some ways, precedes history.

Corrina lived up to my expectation and anticipates reading about my barber chair experiences.

Sidebar

<u>Cost of Treatment</u>	
Kingsman Barber	25 Ringgit + tip
New York Barber	\$35 AUD
Joe's Barber	\$45 USD + tip