

Home from Home

A Shower with a View

June 2024



If you're as spoilt, fortunate and travelled as we are lucky enough to be, you'll know a lot about hotels because you'll have stayed in as many of them as we have.

The first hotel I remember staying in, I was about seven at the time, at Lake Louise in Canada, was I believe, by virtue of some monumental design cock up, constructed back to front with its intended front facade facing away from the lake view.

During my hippy days I stayed in a string of simple back-packer places that cost almost nothing and varied from down right sordid to utterly magical. I remember one - high up in the Himalayas with my bedroom hanging over an impossibly high fall and facing across endless chasms of space towards many of the world's tallest mountains.

Location, as always, is of paramount importance.

There's a pension directly behind the Deux Margot Cafe in Paris, it's still there - an ordinary enough place, typically French, vertical, and memorable for me because it was in one of its simple rooms that I lost my virginity to Tom then one of the world's supermodels.

Once, on the arm of an older lover, I was taken to stay at the Cipriani in Venice - very grand. Villa d'Este on Lake Como was another such hotel he took me to. It proved a persuasive seduction technique.

With J my husband, with whom I have lived for over forty years, he a serial entrepreneur and I once an interior designer, we have been fortunate enough to have stayed in a number of the world's finest hotels, albeit our tastes have more often led us to the interesting and novel rather than to the traditional and grand. In Bangkok, for example, a preference for the Sokhothai rather than the Peninsula.

One of our rules when choosing hotels has been to avoid anywhere that describes itself as a resort, offers golf buggies for getting around and has more than two hundred rooms.

For a while we were avid Aman junkies. Horrors - I fear they now call themselves Aman Resorts. We've stayed in many and would, of course, be

happy to do so again. They're always spectacularly located and designed with a great sense of place. In Bali you're staying in a Balinese palace. In Java, at Borobudur, in a Javanese temple. Fabulous of course and deserving of their success. Maybe too overly focused on 'design and style' if you know what I mean. Great theatre overlying what?

The trouble with grand hotels is, big generalisation, that mostly only old people can afford to stay in them and a collection of mostly old people tends to be rather dull. I'm old myself so can say this. In addition, in such places, local people are rarely present unless bearing a tray or carrying your suitcase.

Years back J remembers trying to enter a hotel in Morocco with a perfectly respectable young man and being told 'no locals allowed.' This rule applied to many hotels then and in many different countries. Clearly an effective measure for keeping out hookers but where else do you take 'a bit on the side' other than a hotel? More importantly, insulting to the local population.

Once, not so long ago, after travelling with a friend who would only countenance staying in expensive hotels we ended up at the Aman in Luang Prabang, Laos. From there I headed on alone to join up with Trustees of the Aids charity we run and, given the nature of our mission, traded a \$800 a night hotel for another that cost less than \$50. In this hotel, located in some Indian city whose name I've forgotten, fun reigned - local people, children, riotous partying, adventurous food, a wedding, colour. The contrast with the perfect and reserved Aman I'd just departed was dramatic and, for me, more enjoyable and memorable. What in modern talk might be described as more 'experientialist'.

Just so you know, those 'in the know' don't 'go on safari', they 'go to the bush'.

In South Africa, at the high end bush camps such as Royal Malawan and Singita, fine dining and designer cushions are guaranteed; also good game sightings of course. However, for the authentic bush experience where you're much more likely to smell elephants than scented candles, our advice is head to walking camps like Plains Camp where you're housed in great comfort in old style bush tents and where the grub is delicious and in plentiful supply - just what you want after three hours stalking rhino on foot! Significant also, your bill from Plains Camp will be a fraction of the one you'll receive from the high end alternatives and you'll leave with an experience that will be infinitely more genuine, profound and memorable.

Don't even think about the Ice Hotel in Sweden. It's a novel idea but in reality not to be recommended. It's cold in their eerily 'other worldly' bedrooms - of

course, that's the idea; but no plumbing. For that you have to trudge down a corridor to the communal loo block. The only excitement I encountered were students from the Royal College of Art wielding chain saws and carving ice sculptures.

We've stayed at many of the Phillippe Starck / Ian Schrager type, architect led design hotels of course. Most seemingly surface decoration draped over limited hotel 'know how'. Often with poor service proffered by ill trained pretty kids, similar to the trio of gorgeous high born Peruvian bus-boys who used to work for us at The Embassy Club and about whom we used to joke 'too much in love with themselves to deign to pick up a dirty glass'.

In Patagonia and the Atacama we stayed in hotels belonging the Tierra group. Amazing locations, interestingly designed and strongly constructed judging by the earthquake that passed through during our stay, shook the place violently but didn't disrupt our lunch.

What we don't need is a place that is designed to make us feel important - such places don't - they make us feel uncomfortable. In Tokyo, when departing The Palace Hotel, forty uniformed staff bowed to us - I counted. What were they thinking as they bowed; 'is my grovelling obsequiousness to your satisfaction sir'?

If you're spoilt as we are and getting older, I'm 70 and J is 74, you prefer 6 star and all it implies - high quality, fabulous food, extreme comfort, beautiful service, etc.. Many places supply that if you can afford them. But magic and fun - that's an all together more challenging and intangible essence.

Since selling our house in London we now stay in a hotel. Our initial choice was one immediately south of the river - fabulous views down the Thames to the Houses of Parliament, but corporate and dull. We didn't return.

Then, in London and New York, we found our home from home - the hotel group whose brilliant formula gets it just right.

They're 6 star in every sense, super friendly without being servile, uber glamorous but never show off, colourful and boldly designed, traditionally comfortable but thoroughly modern, quirky, uplifting, inspiring and fun. Also - no piped music anywhere. What a relief that is! When you're there you feel cool because so many truly cool people are always evident. Their bars and restaurants are filled with young fashionistas. Cameras and models are constantly arriving for shoots. Skilled artisans are regularly delivering flowers for guests and making artful arrangements. Dashing executives are permanently in and out doing deals and air kissing one another. These hotel

are cool and fun. They make even us feel cooler and younger - still in the swing of things.

Congratulations and thank you Soho Hotel London and Crosby Street New York, both Firmdale Hotels.

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