

February-March 2010

In This Issue:

Founded 1981...our 29th year

The legendary *Hotel Hassler Roma*
Fielsole's excellent *Villa San Michele*
Join *illy* to support Ethiopia
London's Egerton House Hotel is small but has a
big heart
Don't travel without these items
Luftbansa plans flights to *Iraq*
Four Seasons opens in intriguing *Beirut*
Heinz Simonitsch offers wellness at *Austria's*
Grandhotel Lienz
Totally inspiring: *Orient-Express' Hotel Caruso*
Belvedere
Puerto Vallarta's Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa
ENTREE visits the spas and more in *Ireland*
Books we like
San Francisco's Parc 55
Do not take the back door when going between
Slovenia and *Croatia*

Plan your holidays at the *Gaylord National*
Resort and Convention Center
Foggy Bottom's *Eldon Luxury Suites*
The Elephant and the *English Riviera* in *South*
Devon
Taj Palace Hotel, Dubai
The Inn at Laguna Beach is a sexy getaway
AGWA de Bolivia: a unique new coca leaf
liqueur
The Bazaar at *SLS Hotel* in *Beverly Hills*
Why we love *L.A.: Spa Luce*
Squire Bracebridge's 17th century Christmas
feast at the *Abwahnee*
Santa Monica's Enterprise Fish Company in its
30th year
San Diego's Hotel Indigo is a green city hotel of
merit

THE LEGENDARY *HOTEL HASSLER ROMA* IS regally set atop the Spanish Steps and features a panoramic view of the entire city. The Hassler has been Rome's five-star lodging of choice for the world's elite for more than a century. Since opening its doors atop the Spanish Steps in 1893, Hotel Hassler Roma, owned and managed by the elegant *Roberto E. Wirth*, has been a magnet for lovers in search of an exquisite and memorable romantic getaway. In 2010, the tradition continues, and this Valentine's Day the Hassler welcomes couples with a special "San Valentino" package. The highlight of the two- or three-night offer is a Valentine's Day menu specially created by Chef *Francesco Apreda* at the hotel's Michelin-starred panoramic restaurant, *Imàgo*, arguably one of the most romantic spots in the Eternal City. Each of the 82 rooms and 13 suites is individually designed and adorned in authentic Italian accents. Highlights include the neighboring, Hassler-owned *Il Palazzetto*, a charming 16-century palazzo that offers a restaurant and wine bar with panoramic terraces, four rooms, and the *International Wine Academy of Roma* which offers wine-tasting classes with



world-renowned sommeliers. The Hassler has just announced an exclusive Symphonic Nights package, inviting guests to attend a symphony by famed Maestro *Claudio Abbado* and the *Mozart Orchestra*. One of the most sought-after events in the Roman musical calendar, the symphony will be held on March 26, 27, and 29 at the *Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia*, one of the oldest musical institutions in the world. The Symphonic Nights package includes: three nights in a Deluxe or Grand Deluxe room; two tickets for the Maestro Abbado and the Mozart Orchestra's concert; after-concert dinner for two in the Hassler's *Salone Eva* (includes starter, first course and home-made dessert); daily buffet breakfast in the Salone Eva for two. Prices, based on double occupancy, are from approximately \$1,766 and the package is valid March 24-29. Visit www.hotelhassler.com.

WHEN THE SUMMER SUN HEATS UP *FLORENCE* AND THE TOURIST rush gets frantic in Firenze, locals and travelers alike head up the hill to nearby Fiesole. We like it just as much there in the winter, spring and fall. Once more important than Florence, the town dates to 1000 A.D. and there's much to see, including restored ruins of the Roman Theater. *Villa San Michele*, now a superb hotel run by the *Orient-Express people*, was once a monastery. The façade and loggia are said to have been designed by none other than *Michelangelo*. The 46 rooms and suites are elegant and serene. There is beauty everywhere at Villa San Michele—roses bloom in well-tended gardens, fountains gurgle over ancient statuary, polished treasures and antiques glow in the candlelight. A private chapel awaits those who need to defer to a higher power. The most magnificent nest in the villa is the Michelangelo Suite, which stretches the length of the façade. The sun sheds light from dawn to dusk, and there's a panoramic view of Florence, the Arno Valley and the Chianti Hills. ENTREE can't imagine a more romantic place for dinner than the open air *Loggia* restaurant on some mellow spring or summer evening. And chef *Attilio di Fabrizio* arriving at one's table with a bowl of steaming piccolo gnocchi, potato and spinach baby dumplings, with lobster sauce. The 15th century Villa San Michele is about a 15-minute walk from the town center. Doubles from about \$673. Tel.: (800) 237-1236, www.villasanmichele.com.

JOIN *ILLY* AND ITS *CUP OF KINDNESS* INITIATIVE TO SUPPORT ETHIOPIA'S coffee-growing communities by buying limited-edition illy *Art Collection* cans. 10% of the sales of the cans will benefit Share Our Strength—an organization dedicated to eradicating childhood hunger throughout the world. These cans are customized by the *Pistoletto Foundation* as part of their *Love Difference* project, an artistic movement that celebrates and unites the different cultures living along the Mediterranean coast. Pistoletto Foundation Cans, two-pack 8.8 oz cans are \$28; shop online at www.illyusa.com.

WHEN ONE THINKS OF A “BOUTIQUE” HOTEL, IMAGES OF MINIMALISM spring to mind. Hip places full of steel and avocado-colored paint with staff prancing around in T-shirts with never a whiff of a tie or jacket in sight. Where everything has to be modern, innovative and new at the expense, often, of comfort and practicality. Thankfully, although classed as a boutique, nothing could be further from this description than *London’s Egerton House Hotel*. Here, while modern conveniences abound, common sense won the game—and handsomely, too. The Egerton is set in a quiet, tree and leaf-filled street just a few paces off the Brompton Road in Knightsbridge. If it’s location that is of importance, then this is nirvana. Turn right out of the hotel and within a few paces you can be entering one of London’s famous museums or a super store such as *Harrods* or *Harvey Nichols*. Turn left instead and within three to five minutes along this quiet street and you bump right into Fulham Road with its eclectic stores, local restaurants and neighborhood pubs. But on our recent stay, although tempted to linger, with the allure of the hotel being so comforting and welcome, we opted to return and to sit for a while in the downstairs lounge bar before, quite reluctantly, heading out to dinner. A friend who lives locally assured us that *Antonio*, who effortlessly attends to the needs of all in the bar area, makes the best martinis in London. He does. The soft conversation and elegant surroundings make this bar one of London’s hidden gems. The staff at the Egerton House were smartly dressed, articulate and knowledgeable and there to make a guest feel welcome and at home. The rooms are sumptuously decorated, some with original artwork by Toulouse Lautrec, Matisse and Picasso. And, having been many times at the wrong end of this problem, the built-in international power outlets found in each room are a blessing to behold. With beds that swallow you into oblivion, flowers and fresh fruit upon the stand, a glass of welcoming champagne sent to your room upon arrival and staff with attitudes of days gone by, the Egerton House Hotel far exceeds the inadequate title of “boutique.” For it may be a small hotel in size, but it has the heart of a giant. *The Egerton House Hotel, 17-19 Egerton Terrace, Knightsbridge, London, SW3 2BX. Telephone (0)20 7589 2412, www.egertonhousehotel.com*. The Egerton is part of *Red Carnation*, a distinguished boutique collection of five- and four-star family-run hotels in *London, Dorset, Guernsey, Geneva, Palm Beach* and *South Africa, www.redcarnation.com/book@rchmail.com*.

DON’T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT THEM: *MOLESKINE PASSIONS Notebooks*, six in all, each covering a separate passion: books, movies, music, cooking, wine and wellness, www.moleskine.com. *Able Planet’s Clear Harmony* noise canceling headphones muffle

any background noise, even while you are on a plane 37,000 feet up in the air. The secret behind the sound is a proprietary Able Planet technology called *Linx Audio* that was originally developed for a new generation of top-of-the-line hearing aids. The technology alters the audio signal to increase the intensity of higher frequency harmonics making it easier to hear words or notes in the higher frequencies where clarity is often lost, and more. These headphones can be used with computers, portable DVD players, iPod, MP3 players, etc. Visit www.ableplanet.com.

AS IRAQ'S CIVIL AVIATION CONTINUES TO OPEN UP, DEMAND FOR FLIGHTS to the country is growing. *Lufthansa* is examining the possibility of launching several new services to Iraq and is currently planning to serve the capital, *Baghdad*, and the city of *Erbil* in Northern Iraq from its hubs in *Frankfurt* and *Munich*. Lufthansa aims to launch the new services this summer, once it has obtained the necessary traffic rights. Further infrastructure requirements are also being examined. With the resumption of flights to Iraq, Lufthansa is pursuing its policy of expanding its route network in the Middle East, which it presently serves with 88 flights per week to 14 destinations in eleven countries. Lufthansa operated flights to Baghdad from 1956 until the start of the Gulf War in 1990. Erbil is already being served from Vienna by *Austrian Airlines*, which is part of the Lufthansa Group. From next summer, Baghdad and Erbil will be linked to Lufthansa's hubs in Frankfurt and Munich and will thus be integrated into Lufthansa's global route network. The fares and exact flight times with connections from and to the U.S. will be announced at a later date as soon as booking for the new routes opens.

PREDICTED TO BE ONE OF THE "IT" DESTINATIONS IN 2010, *BEIRUT* lures international travelers with its shopping, dining and nightlife scenes juxtaposed with 5000 years of culture and history. Further heralding the city's renaissance, the newest *Four Seasons* hotel has not only opened its doors, but also welcomed its first guests. Dining on prime cuts of Charolais beef while sipping a local wine and soaking in uninterrupted marina views on the terrace of *The Grill Room* or enjoying a tranquil afternoon 26 floors above the bustle of downtown next to a glistening rooftop pool are just two examples of the distinct experiences that await guests at Four Seasons Hotel Beirut. More information on the hotel and destination can be found at <http://press.fourseasons.com/beirut/hotel-news/four-seasons-hotel-now-open-in-magical-and-intriguing-beirut/>.

VETERAN HOTELIER *HEINZ SIMONITSCH*, WHO BUILT AN INTERNATIONAL reputation as the beloved Managing Director of *Jamaica's Half Moon*, has a prescription for a new, high-tech concept in health and wellness centers. In his five-star *Grandhotel Lienz*, located in the heart of the *Austrian Alps*, he's combined luxury living with a world class medical and spa center. Vacationers are flocking there to relax in posh suites overlooking the lovely Isel River and at their leisure stepping onto elevators zipping them directly to the center for basic or extended physical checkups. *Dr. Peter Lechleitner*, specialist in internal medicine and cardiology, leads a program that includes diagnosis, weight loss, nutrition, ending smoking and much more, combining conventional medicine with the latest medical advances. Traditional Chinese medicine is also available. A basic checkup costs \$842; an extended one is priced at \$1,423. Hotel rates start at \$177. Tel.: 43 (0) 485-264 07, www.grandhotel-lienz.com.

ANDRE GIDE DESCRIBED BEAUTIFUL *Ravello, Italy* as "nearer to the sky than to the sea." Dramatic cliffs plunge to the *Amalfi* coast and terraced gardens open onto changing panoramas that inspired geniuses including Grieg, Miró and Tennessee Williams. From *Orient-Express' Hotel Caruso Belvedere*, this azure spectacle seizes the heart and ravishes the soul. A former 11th century palace overlooking the Amalfi Coast, Hotel Caruso has long welcomed guests to its exquisitely decorated accommodations. Recently returned to its original glory, the Caruso has just 48 rooms and suites. This is a jewel within a jewel filled with Mediterranean magic and views to die for. The furnishings reflect Neapolitan style and tradition and has been exclusively created for Hotel Caruso; some rooms also feature antique 18th and 19th-century pieces. The biggest star in the hotel is the open-air heated infinity pool with evocative medieval ruins on one side and infinite shades of blue stretching out before your eyes. Traditional Neapolitan cuisine and regional Italian dishes are the specialty, "Mediterranean" cooking with an accent on traditional regional recipes from Naples and the Southern part of Italy, revisited in a contemporary style by the brilliant Executive Chef *Mimmo di Raffaele*. Visit www.hotelcaruso.com. Orient Express is more than a collection of the best luxury hotels, trains, resorts, restaurants, river boats and safaris in the world—they offer a way of life that elevates the travel experience to the highest level. See their amazing world at www.orient-express.com.



NESTLED ON *BAHIA DE BANDERAS* IN *PUERTO VALLARTA, MEXICO*, *VILLA Premiere Hotel & Spa* is an inviting retreat located on a serpentine stretch of golden sand beach within walking distance from downtown. The resort is proud of being awarded the AAA Four Diamond status for three consecutive years. Getting to paradise for a vacation can often be long and frustrating. Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa makes it worth the wait with a free welcome relaxing anti-stress hand and neck massage and cocktail at check-in to ease jet lag. Guests can choose from a pillow menu to ensure a great night's sleep for the duration of their stay. Butler service provides for the ultimate in care. Butlers will unpack, iron out the wrinkles, make dinner reservations and more so guests don't have to lift a finger. Complimentary weekly yoga and meditation classes are also available on the beach. The hotel's contemporary Mexican ambiance houses just 83, beautifully appointed guest rooms and suites come complete with Mexican furniture and art, private terraces, whirlpool tubs and sliding doors overlooking miles of Pacific blue. Designed as a tranquil place, reaching out to the region's indigenous culture and customs to create a most distinctive sense of place, the *Spa at Premiere* offers a feast for the senses. Stone-patterned flooring, stucco walls, Tepescohuite tree beams and rope ceilings, and palm mats provide textural contrasts while flowering plants, hand painted murals of angels by local artists done in subdued colors, Huichol Indian handicrafts, tranquility fountains, and aroma candles create an inviting and relaxing setting. www.premiereonline.com.mx.

ENTREE HAS ALWAYS ADMIRERED THE SPLENDID SPAS OF *IRELAND*, SO WE journeyed across The Pond seeking relaxation and restoration. The end of our rainbow landed us in the enchanting southwest region of the Emerald Isle, and we struck gold with first-class pampering, dramatic scenery and countless culinary surprises. Just eight miles north of *Shannon International Airport* in County Limerick, we bedded down at *Dromoland Castle Hotel and Country Club*, a 16th century baronial estate. Once the ancestral seat of Gaelic royalty, it is one of Ireland's finest castle hotels. Nestled beside Lough Dromoland, surrounded by 410 acres of rolling grounds bursting with quail and pheasant, Dromoland, with its halls furnished in fine antiques, antlered heads, historical documents and grand family portraiture, transports its guests to a time of carefree elegance ensured by an impeccable staff. The recently opened spa is an intimate haven featuring the *Anne Semonin* treatment collection. A wide range of tailor-made Parisian products and therapies target specific skin types and focus on ultimate comfort. Also offered is the exclusive Irish line of organic products by *Voya*. Those who

try the seaweed bath benefit from therapeutic knowledge passed down from Ireland's earliest inhabitants. Staying at The Dromoland and indulging at the spa within its castle walls makes for a unique escape. Rates for one of the 85 individually decorated guest rooms and deluxe suites start at \$350. Attractive offers and packages, including championship golf, are found on the website, www.dromoland.ie. After a two-hour drive past iconic scenery and tidy towns, we arrived in famed *Killarney* in County Kerry. At the foot of the McGillicuddy Reeks, Ireland's highest mountains, and on the edge of the majestic Lough Lein, Killarney is one of Ireland's most treasured destinations. We chose the *Europe Hotel* for its lough and mountain views from the guest room balconies, and aware that the hotel had just completed a 70 million dollar renovation, we couldn't wait to see inside. The Hotel Europe is impressive on all accounts, a grand lobby, cozy libraries, stylish and contemporary rooms with balconies opening up to the lakeside wilderness. The spa by *ESPA* is a visual feast of sculpture lighting and design; spiral staircases skirted by water lead to over 15,000 square feet of detailed bliss. ESPA at the Europe offers a host of signature treatments combining acute science with eastern philosophy and ayurvedic influence. Full body holistic rituals complete with hot stones, advanced facials and finishing touches make up just a fraction of the restorative possibilities. Whether working out on state of the art conditioning equipment, swimming in the massive pool or indulging in the vast selection of treatments, the atmosphere alone will raise your sense of well being. The modern five-star guest rooms start at \$300. Visit www.theeurope.com. The highlands of Ireland, giving way to the rugged coastline, is a must-see for this area; take some time to soak it in. We happened upon the most wonderful seaside town of *Glandore*, famous for its regattas and yachting tradition. We'll remember it for the unpretentious and absolutely delicious seafood lunch served up at the *Glandore Inn*. We gorged on a bounty of local fish, crab, prawns, squid and heaven-sent smoked mackerel. The abundant farms, smoke houses, bakeries and fisheries near the town of *Kinsale* are instrumental in maintaining its reputation as Ireland's gourmet capital. Situated directly on the oceanfront complete with a working dock and bobbing sailboats, the *Trident Hotel* is at arms length of all the excitement that Kinsale has to offer. Once outside the handsome and strategic 75 guest rooms of the Trident, which start at a reasonable \$120 (www.tridenthotel.com), a walk around is well rewarded in this charming town of historic significance. *Giles Norman*, Ireland's most recognized fine art photographer, lives and works here. We dined at *Max's Wine Bar* to taste its 50-mile radius concept wherein ingredients are sourced from a bountiful area surrounding Kinsale. The warm atmosphere in Max's is a testament to the loyalty of the locals earned by owners chef *Olivier Queva* and his wife, *Ann*

Marie. After enjoying the always-excellent brown bread and delicious butter of this nation, the mixed starter of poached herbed oysters, scallops and lobster proved supreme. Brill, a local white fish, was light as air and bright with balance. All can be paired with exceptional wines suggested by Ann Marie. On *Fota Island*, a mere fifteen minutes from Cork, Ireland's second largest city, the 131-room *Fota Island Resort* is a tempting prospect. This modern hotel shares the island with a *Jeff Howes*-designed championship golf course and a wildlife preserve. The contemporary styling throughout the property is appealing and amplified in the sumptuous spa. It offers over 60 stress-relieving experiences, an acacia thermal suite and a huge hydrotherapy facility. The comfortable rooms have high-tech trimmings and great rolling wooded views. Rates start at \$175. Information on package offerings, including weddings, is at www.fotaisland.ie. When in the vibrant and attraction-filled city of *Cork*, drop in to the *Old English Market*, one of the oldest of its kind, offering delicacies since 1788. Upstairs at the *Farmgate Café*, exquisite traditional Irish cooking awaits. Here you can try *drisheen* in the city of its creation, a blood serum sausage prepared as it has been for centuries. The home-cooked Irish favorites like shepherd's pie pack in the locals, and the menu is created daily with the freshest ingredients from the bustling market below. Be sure to ask permission when taking pictures in the market; the many butchers bent over their toils keep sharp edges to their knives. In East County Cork there lies yet another oasis for the spa enthusiast and luxury escape artist. Built around an 18th Century classic manor house on a 220-acre estate, *Castlemartyr* is set upon a fairytale landscape complete with slow-motion swans and ruins of a castle built by knights of Strongbow in 1210. Luxury is an understatement here. In keeping with the Dromoland Castle, its sister property, only the highest standard of service and professionalism is observed by staff. The spa is expansive at 24,000 square feet. Glass and stone sculpture balance a naturally uplifting interior décor by paralleling the wonders and light of the outdoors seen through three levels of glass façade. You can look out upon the formal gardens while swimming in the indoor heated ozone-treated pool. Inviting treatment rooms yield to a myriad of rejuvenating and restorative possibilities. Rooms in the original manor house command higher rates; otherwise rates start at \$325. www.castlemartyrresort.com. Look for more information on destinations in Ireland at discoverireland.com.

BOOKS: TROPICAL HOMES OF THE EASTERN CARIBBEAN BY *Margaret Gajek* with photos by *Derek Galon* is a stunning and exotic insight into the unique lifestyle of the islands that clearly shows the authors' passion for the beauty and treasures of the islands, visit www.ozonezonebooks.com; 1000 ULTIMATE EXPERIENCES, by *Lonely Planet*,

the world's leading travel authority, has brought together 1000 ideas, places and activities to inspire and entertain, for travelers and lovers of life-lists alike. Sure to inspire all types of travelers to start ticking off their own boxes of places they've always wanted to see and things they've always wanted to do, including: Finest Classic Train Trips; Best Ways to See Europe; Best Places to Have Your Midlife Crisis; Most Beautiful Town Squares and Top Travel Boasts, Myths & Legends. While Europe has an undeniably rich winemaking history, the United States also offers ideal conditions for making and aging wine—particularly in California's spectacular modern wine caves. INTO THE EARTH: A Wine Cave Renaissance published by *Panache*, is the first documentary of its kind. Masterfully written and photographed by *Daniel D'Agostini* with *Molly Chappellet*, the book includes a foreword by renowned wine writer *Hugh Johnson*. With vivid photographs and interesting anecdotes from cave experts, INTO THE EARTH is an intriguing pictorial and written tale, much like the walls of ancient caves. With exquisite images of never-before-photographed caves and insight from respected cave designers, architects, engineers, drillers, specialists, and winery proprietors, this phenomenal collection dives into California's quiet, dark, and cool locations. *Far Niente*, *Sloan Estate*, *Schramsberg*, *BOND*, *Quintessa*, and *Stag's Leap Wine Cellars* are among the featured caves.

BIG CITY, BRIGHT LIGHTS. FROM YOUR TOWER ROOM AT *SAN FRANCISCO'S* beautiful *Parc 55* hotel five minutes from Union Square, you look down at cable cars scooting past Union Square, the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset and the brilliant lights of this glam town at night. In the distance, Bay waters glisten. The 1,010 rooms—all with bay-style windows—in this 32-story tower have been recently renovated so sleekly that even though you're surrounded by upscale shops, hot restaurants and theaters below, you might well decide not to leave your nest above it all. It took 18 months to transform *Parc 55* and the approach has resulted in a modern and relaxed hotel in rich browns and subtle blues and reds. Guest rooms have high quality linens and exceptional technology. You can remove all pre-dinner guilt at the 24-hour health club, then plunge into the *cityhouse* restaurant's menu, which, while well-rounded, is big on red meat sizzling on the wood fire grill. A 12-ounce certified Angus tenderloin goes for a reasonable \$36. And since this is a westward-gazing city, we were tempted by *Siam Thai*, with its exotic Thai cuisine. We like the 24 hour complimentary health club here at *Parc 55*. Regrettably, parking is in short supply in this town. *Parc 55* charges \$44 a night plus tax to park your car, unless you find a package that includes it. Doubles, however, are a relative bargain at \$169. *55 Cyril Magnin St., 94102, www.parc55hotel.com.*

IT IS A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION WHEN TRAVELING TO USE THE UNOFFICIAL entrance—and usually a truly terrible idea. Especially when it comes to border crossings. Take the frontier between *Croatia* and *Slovenia*, two less-than-loving neighbors, on the lovely Istrian coast. Being a Schengen border, that is to say on the perimeter of the European Union, immigration enquiries are taken very seriously indeed. And so the tailbacks build. “Of course we could take the unofficial road,” suggests our driver. “It is fairly safe. The police don’t shoot to kill.” Hmm. We queued up like everyone else. This is not an isolated instance. Border zones in the Balkans, some parts of Africa and much of Latin America are becoming increasingly tense places to be, we find. “If it is not the Federales it is the cartelistas,” a Mexican guide complained. Quite so. These days we even use the front door of our house.

WE CAN HIGHLY RECOMMEND SPENDING SOME HOLIDAY TIME AT the *Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center*, located just minutes outside *Washington, D.C.* The Resort’s Christmas on the Potomac Celebration offers visitors and guests a holiday so packed with activities that we can only mention some of the highlights. The first has to be Gaylord National’s *ICE*. This is the coldest event (they provide parkas) and also the coolest (seriously). Picture 15,000 square feet and tons of carved ice in 10 holiday scenes that will take your breath away. Or maybe the two story ice slides will do that. The creations are completely stunning and we are sure that if the temperature wasn’t kept at a chilly +9 degrees, we would have stayed for hours. The master carvers who devote a month to creating the display are from *Harbin*, the capital of China’s Northernmost Province. These artists are unique in the world and their work should not be missed. One cannot help but draw obvious parallels to these men and the carvers of the Terra Cotta Soldiers many centuries before. We encourage a visit to their website, www.ChristmasOnThePotomac.com to read more on the 25-year history of these artisans and their techniques. With so much going on at the Gaylord during this time it is easy to overlook the hotel and its staff. We don’t want to be guilty of that because it is truly a special place. The property is a first rate, luxury hotel and the staff reminds us what Southern Hospitality is all about. We have put The Gaylord on our “must return to” list. When we do, our first stop is their *Old Hickory Steakhouse*. What they do with salt-stone seared Wagyu beef is pure genius. While there, don’t miss chatting with *Carolyn Stromburg*, the Maitre d’Fromage (one of four in the U.S.) and sample some of her exquisite chesses. We also would suggest having a vintage Port from the port cart to complete the experience. The Gaylord Resort and Convention Center opened in April of 2008 along the banks of the Potomac

River less than eight miles from the nation's capital and is now the largest such facility on the Eastern Seaboard. Ask for a room facing the river for some unparalleled views across to D.C. During this time there are packages galore. One of my favorites is the Grandparents Play and Stay Free...from \$299. See www.gaylordhotels.com for details.

FOR A FINE TOURIST HOTEL IN *WASHINGTON D.C.*, WE CAN RECOMMEND *The Eldon Luxury Suites* which are situated only one block from the Convention Center in the revitalized *Shaw District*. This all-suites hotel is ideally located close to many of Washington's top attractions, i.e. Chinatown, The Verizon Center, The Mall and several well-known restaurants and theaters. The recent renovation at the hotel has transformed the suites into large and very comfortable units suitable for short or long term stays. The present customer base includes leisure travelers, conventioners, diplomats and long-term guests. Rates at opening were from \$154 to \$754 for the penthouse. For more information visit www.eldonsuites.com or call (202) 540-5000 for reservations.

LAST MONTH WE EXTOLLED THE VIRTUES OF *PETER de Savary's Cary Arms* in *South Devon*. The Devon seaside town of *Torquay* sells itself as "The English Riviera", and there are indeed places—if the sun's out, that you could mistake for the south of France. There are palm trees on the seafront, and sweeping sea views. Yet other parts of town have that slightly down at heel atmosphere of the 1950's seaside resort: rows of brightly painted boards advertising Victorian terraced houses now operating as small hotels or b&bs. *The Elephant* is the best place in town; a restaurant upstairs and brasserie below that punches well above its weight. Arriving late on Friday night, we were met by the charming manager, *Jason*, who immediately made us feel at home. We were surprised and delighted by roast partridge and guinea fowl prepared by chef *Simon Hulstone*, now celebrating his fourth year with a Michelin star. The accolade is deserved and eating in this simply decorated Indian-inspired brasserie belies expectation. Pudding, too, was a real treat. We have never tasted anything quite like "Kim's tiramisu with marzipan ice cream and poached pears," and we very much hope to again. *The Elephant Brasserie, 3 & 4 Beacon Terrace, Torquay, Devon, TQ1 2BH. info@theelephantrestaurant.cp.uk; 01803 200044.*



WHEN YOU GET OFF THE PLANE IN *DUBAI* AND CHECK INTO THE five-star *Taj Palace Hotel*, you're reminded what part of the world you're in: The ballroom is in the shape of an Arabian tent. The Taj offers desert safari trips, dhow cruises and just about everything you'd want—except alcohol. Booze is not served to guests, but there's plenty of exotic food fare. *Handi* serves terrific Northern Indian cuisine, *Sakura* offers extraordinary Japanese and pan-Asian dishes, at *Topkapi* the menu is Turkish and Arabian and at *Verdi* you choose from savory Italian dishes. There are 147 spacious rooms and suites and two Royal suites, plus 90 fully furnished apartments, all in cherished Taj style. The Taj Palace is a place where you can leave your laptop at home and rent one. Fitness and fun options include the 24-hour Fitness Centre, Hamel El Musk perfumery, Malek Salon for men and women, pharmacy, Qum carpet shop, shopping arcade, pool, Musketeers Kids Club and Jiva Spas. We trust Taj and always have for the finest hotels in India (and now in New York, San Francisco and Boston). Rooms start at \$185 double; call (971-4) 223-2222; visit www.tajhotels.com/dubai.

THE *INN AT LAGUNA BEACH* IS ADVERTISED AS A “GETAWAY” BUT THIS luxurious (52 ocean view rooms) beachfront inn is a “get to.” And if you like romantic sunsets, unique restaurants, and world-class shopping and art galleries—this beats almost anything from Santa Monica to San Diego. The reason is simple - the hotel is right in the midst of this quaint seaside “village” founded at the turn of the century as an artist's colony and later became home to the surfing explosion of mid-century existential life in Southern California. Twenty minutes from the *John Wayne/Orange County Airport*, you can leave your car keys on the nightstand and walk to anything, including the beach, art galleries, the shopping district, and cultural venues, including the *Laguna Art Museum*, and the *Laguna Playhouse*. We especially enjoyed a lovely French dinner at *C'est La Vie* (just a 5 minute walk) and then a candlelight dessert at the hotel spa, all moments after the most inspiring sunset imaginable. All amenities are world class including several conference facilities for corporate meetings, featherbeds, data port access, but the most seductive benefit is the beauty of the Laguna coastline and the village itself as it winds back toward the foothills where galas and festivals are part of community life. This is not a man-made “corporate” resort - rather a charming town that evolved over one hundred years and still retains some of the historic charm of its early years. If you want to feel “part” of something authentic, hurry and “get to” *Inn at Laguna Beach 211 Northeast Highway Laguna Beach, CA 92651, (949) 497-9722 or (800) 544-4479, www.innatlagunabeach.com*.

A *GWA DE BOLIVIA* IS A UNIQUE NEW COCA LEAF LIQUEUR THAT IS FAST gaining cult status in California and across the nation. AGWA is made with wild Bolivian coca leaves that are hand-picked at 2000 meters in the Andes and shipped under armed guard to Amsterdam to be macerated and de-cocainized. The potent high strength flavor formula is reduced to 60 proof, bottled and then shipped around the world in a more conventional format. Agwa de Bolivia has already built cult status in California and is currently available in 35 states across the country. The signature drink is the Bolivian Kiss (a simple fresh lime ritual) just bite a lime wedge then drink the AGWA de Bolivia and feel the buzz. Drinking AGWA with lime replicates the South American practice of chewing the coca leaf. The lime changes the pH of the mouth allowing secondary coca leaf alkaloids to be activated and creates an oxygen buzz. AGWA's signature cocktail is the Bolivian Mojito, a minty and refreshing twist on the mojito we all know and love. Visit www.agwabuzz.com.

WHY WE LOVE *L.A.: THE BAZAAR AT SLS Hotel*, a fantastical and playful hotel and restaurant, filled with dark and sexy atmosphere and the incredibly innovative cooking of GQ Chef of the Year *José Andrés*. Andrés walks a tight rope between magic and culinary sophistication and never stumbles. The restaurant is an indoor piazza of sorts and we swooned over small plates of dizzying flavor combinations: chicken with figs, lilliputian Philly cheesesteaks, green asparagus tempura romesco, American caviar cones, bagel and lox cones, cotton candy foie gras, sweet potato chips with yogurt, tamarind, star anise, olives both modern and traditional that were solid and liquid at the same time and exploded in your mouth, tuna ceviche, and avocado roll with jicama, micro cilantro and coconut dressing. We screamed for more of and we gobbled up tiny ripe Caprese cherry tomatoes-small bombs filled with liquid mozzarella, Norwegian lobster seaweed salad, and lastly, oysters with lemon. We wanted and got lollipops and a couple of bonbons for dessert. All with wonderful wines from an excellent list. *Ribeiro* wines, Spain's biggest white wine success story of recent years, are set to launch on the U.S. market in February—with the help of Chef Andrés. Andrés will introduce easy-drinking, indigenous varietals like *Treixadura*, *Torrontés*, *Loureira*, and *Godello* as well as the established *Albariño* to the U.S. market. Ribeiro wines are incredibly elegant and aromatic, truly the rising stars of white wines in Europe. Service at The Bazaar is friendly and crisp. The hotel is *Philippe Starck* at his whimsical best but not all fun and games: it is, at its heart, a serious hotel with beautiful rooms and fine service. A tempting menu of



room options creates a customized experience in each of the 297 guest rooms and suites designed by Starck for *Cassina*, including seven lifestyle suites with personal gym equipment and 32 hypoallergenic Pure Rooms. SLS and The Bazaar are musts for visitors and local alike wanting to push the envelope and be indulged with romanticism and surprise. The bar attracts a collection of long-legged beauties and their swains and is highly recommended. *Ciel-Spa at SLS* is a Starck-designed dreamscape that emphasizes luxury in a soothing yet playful setting. The SLS is ideally situated at the crossroads of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles, a landmark of sleek sophistication, just steps from The Beverly Center, the sparkling storefronts of Rodeo Drive, and favorite celebrity haunts. *SLS Hotel and The Bazaar, 465 S. La Cienega Boulevard, Beverly Hills. (310) 247-0400, www.sbe.com.*

WHY WE LOVE *L.A.* EVEN MORE: *SPA LUCE* IN THE *RENAISSANCE Hollywood Hotel* for celebrity-inspired skin, body pampering, nail therapy, waxing and makeup, and top-of-the-line beauty and health products. This special getaway—reminiscent of a Grecian white-washed villa—is perfect for an urban escape that focuses on all-around natural beauty. Filled with sunlight, natural woods, and rare marble, Luce Spa has seven comfortable treatment rooms in which to savor all. One of our favorites is a special hammam ritual of Turkish massage with essences of cardamon, jasmine, bergamot, amber, clove and coffee-lemon-olive stone scrub, clay wrap. There's lots more at Spa Luce like couples therapies and Ultrasonic Microdermabrasion. Exclusive product lines used are Sonya Dakar Skincare, Somme Institute and Red Flower. A special line of Spa Luce skin and bath products featuring a signature scent was created exclusively for Spa Luce by Dr. Sharon, a renowned aromatherapist, acupuncturist, chiropractor and masseuse. A roof top pool awaits outside Spa Luce with food service by *Wolfgang Puck*. Visit *www.spaluce.com*, (323) 491-1376. Credit goes to the charming *Sara LaBree*, the spa's calm and talented director, for orchestrating all this excellence in total serenity.

A PERFECTLY TIMED BLANKET OF SNOW COVERED *YOSEMITE VALLEY* IN December when the storied *Bracebridge Dinner* transformed the *Abwahnee* hotel's baronial grand dining room into *Squire Bracebridge's 17th Century Christmas feast*, complete with elaborate decorations, a lavish seven-course dinner and 60 professional singers, amusing characters and various folderol. At one time, it was almost impossible to score tickets to the dinner, but in recent years it's been expanded from one night to

eight performances. The high-raftered hall holds 300 guests in tuxes and other formal wear, some decked out in masks and festive hats. Two years after the Bracebridge debuted in 1927, famed photographer-pianist *Ansel Adams* took over as director and performer. When he retired in 1973, *Eugene Fulton* became director. Fulton's daughter *Andrea*, who first joined the cast as a five-year-old, took command following the death of her father in 1978. She's still very much in gracious command. Gorgeous in a queenly velvet gown, she plays a leading role in the pageant as The Housekeeper, enormous keys at her waist, presiding with dignity and engaging in mirthful comedy with The Jester. For reservations to the 2010 dinner, call (801) 559-4884.

IF YOU CAN'T FIND FISH AND FUN IN *SANTA MONICA*, WHERE CAN YOU FIND it? ENTREE found both at *The Enterprise Fish Company*, celebrating its 30th anniversary at the same location—in a classic 1917 brick building of charm and character. This popular eatery is brimming with fresh seafood on the mesquite grill, West Australian lobsters in the tank and a bar that is as lively as we could handle. Vintage photos of Venice (California, that is) line the walls. Best deal: several times a week they serve a two-pound Maine lobster with two sides for only \$29.95. To wash down our spicy Cajun jambalaya (\$19.95) we hesitated at the strong Delirium Tremens Belgian ale (\$7.50) and settled for the silky Chimay Red Trappist ale (\$7.75). The happy hour, one of the best in Santa Monica, is a seven-day affair. We finished off with the Key Lime pie (\$6.95.) The wait staff is young and excellent. The Enterprise (there's a sister restaurant in Santa Barbara) can get noisy. But who cares when the food and service are so good. Get to Santa Monica asap, it is a hub of art, music, shopping and fine dining. *The Enterprise Fish Company, 174 Kinney St., Santa Monica, 90405, (310) 392-8366, www.enterprisefishco.com.*

THIRTY-THREE PANELS OF COLORED BLUE GLASS CASCADE DOWN THE western wall of the twelve story *Hotel Indigo*, mimicking waves on the Pacific, they reflect the warm light of another spectacular Southern California sunset. The forty-foot tall installation by local artist *Lisa Schirmer* is a shimmering beacon marking the latest addition to the *San Diego* skyline. Hotel Indigo, a 210-room boutique hotel from the *ICH* hotel family, has opened its flagship in the heart of this exciting city just steps away from the historic gas lamp district and *Petco Field*, home of the San Diego Padres. With its foundation firmly established in concepts of intelligent design and environmental sustainability, Hotel Indigo has distinguished itself by being the only LEED certified hotel in downtown San Diego. Enjoy fresh herbs,

grown on their “green roof,” incorporated within seasonal cuisine at the *Phi Bar Bistro* situated in the open-air lobby. For drinks with a great skyline view, don't miss the Phi Bar on the ninth floor terrace; there is a clear view of *Petco Field* which enriches the experience, however, a genuine interest in baseball is best served attending games in the stadium, only a short stroll from the hotel. The Hotel Indigo is pet friendly with rooms from \$179. Be prepared to pay \$32 nightly for parking but at least it is valet. Check their website at www.hotelindigo.com.

ENTREE has always had a soft spot for the lovely town of Vero Beach on Florida's East Coast ever since that great resort community John's Island was founded there in 1970. We know of no place that can match Vero's assets: perfect weather, distinguished residents, diverse activities, upscale residential options, top golf, beautiful beaches, and more. We urge you to consider Vero Beach if Florida is in your future plans. We want to recommend Cliff Norris Real Estate to you. Cliff is the third generation of his family to be involved in South Florida real estate. He knows Vero like no one else. Cliff and his company cater to buyers, sellers and renters at John's Island but he is well-versed in all Vero Beach property. Cliff Norris Real Estate, LLC, 4853 North A1A, Vero Beach, FL 32963, (772) 231-5595.

Great travel agents are as rare as Faberge eggs. Vivian Taylor is one great agent. What does it take to be great? A combination of personal passion for travel with real boots-on-the-ground experience and confident knowledge about destinations to exceed the clients' expectations. Deep commitment and expertise to design travel experiences that match unique hopes and ambitions with seamless execution. When you talk to Vivian, you have a pro on your case. She possesses that special quality of superior know how, quick reactions, superb followup, detail orientation, impeccable contacts and unfailing dedication to her clients-24 hours a day. At her side is Jeff Rodgers who provides equally devoted client attention. No wonder so many high profile travelers turn to Vivian Taylor for their travel needs. Her exclusive status and trade tips have remained an industry secret, reserved for only the cr me de la cr me for many years. But now the discriminating public too can have access to her coveted insider travel services. We are not surprised that Robert and William Carr-Hartley (www.carrhartley.com), one of the most prestigious names in customized African safaris, has chosen to work with Vivian and Jeff. If Africa is on your travel bucket list, contact Vivian to discuss a private African safari tailored to your interests and needs. Vivian is based in Delaware but is available for clients anywhere in the United States and abroad. Contact Vivian Taylor International, (302) 945-7255; mobile: (310) 497-2650; (323) 270-6748; Fax: (302) 945-7266; e-mail: vivian@vivantaylor.com.

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