



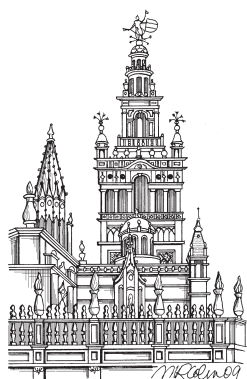
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April 2009 | Our 30th Year

OPINIONATED REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY

An Unforgettable Journey Through Andalusia



BY ALL ACCOUNTS, the Moors were heartbroken when they were expelled from Andalusia, and after an early spring journey through Spain's seductive southwestern province, we can certainly understand why. It is one of the world's most enchanting destinations, with friendly people, fascinating cities and soul-stirring landscapes.

The Moors (the English word comes from the Spanish *moro*, or "dark") were only the last of a long line of conquerors to be smitten by this sunny, fertile, well-watered corner of Europe. However, they gave the region its distinct and vibrant personality. For nearly 800 years, the Moors lavished their affection on the conquered

territory, leaving a legacy of majestic architecture and exquisite gardens. When the Spaniards finally drove them back to North Africa in 1492, Andalusia entered a new golden age with the discovery of the Americas. Columbus sailed from the coastline near Huelva, and the subsequent Spanish conquests of Peru and Mexico funneled treasure to Seville, which became sumptuously wealthy and, by 1570, the third-largest city in Europe.

Today, the timeless charm of cities such as Córdoba, Seville and Granada, as well as the striking *pueblos blancos* (hilltop "white towns"), is complemented by some of Europe's most modern infrastructure, including excellent roads and AVE (Alta Velocidad Española) 190 mph high-speed trains from Madrid.

On our recent trip, we discovered that many fine new hotels have recently opened, a testament to both the region's enduring appeal and its long tradition of hospitality. April/May and September/October have been considered the best travel months for sightseeing rather than sunbathing. But we found the region enchanting in late February, just on the cusp of spring, when days were sunny, nights cool, crowds absent and room rates lower. To do Andalusia justice, we suggest an itinerary of at least 10 days.

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Córdoba

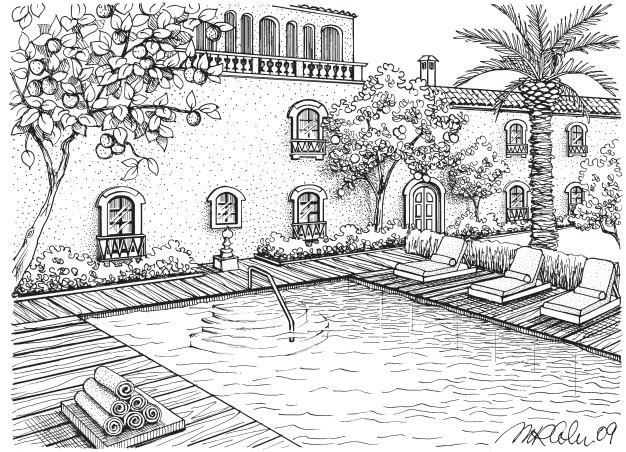
A THOUSAND YEARS AGO, Córdoba was a great cultural and political center, capital of the Umayyad rulers from Damascus. Today, it is a provincial capital with a population of around 325,000, and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Its chief attraction is its celebrated Mezquita, an eighth-century mosque with hundreds of jasper, onyx, granite and marble columns, many salvaged from a Roman temple. The city contains a wealth of other artistic and architectural riches, however, and it is a particular delight to wander through the narrow cobblestone streets of the old Arab and Jewish quarters.

Though not well-known to non-Europeans, the Hospes group is a generally excellent collection of eight boutique properties in Spain, plus the Hôtel Lancaster in Paris. Its 53-room **PALACIO DEL BAILLO** opened in 2007 and has a perfect location in one of Córdoba's most charming neighborhoods.

The hotel is an admirable work of historic preservation, since it combines several 16th- and 18th-century mansions constructed around serene inner courtyards planted with orange trees. The contemporary interior of the property contrasts with fragments of Moorish architecture. Our room overlooked the hotel's outdoor swimming pool and had a predominantly minimalist décor, with white walls, dark-stained wooden doors and a chocolate-colored parquet floor. The bath was faced in dove-gray granite and provided a walk-in shower with an oversize showerhead, double vanities, a roomy egg-shaped modern tub and Korres toiletries from the oldest homeopathic

pharmacy in Athens. (The cinnamon-scented shower gel is delightfully invigorating).

We also greatly enjoyed the cuisine at the excellent *Senzone Restaurant*, which occupies an interior courtyard and has a glass floor through which diners may glimpse the Roman ruins excavated during the renovations.



Swimming pool at the Palacio del Bailío.

A salad of asparagus, green beans and julienned Serrano ham was followed by roast shoulder of lamb, griddled scallops and a very good cheese plate.

Our only reservation about the property is that it tends to suffer from “boutique-hotel syndrome,” or the inattentiveness of young, inexperienced staff members who seem so impressed by the glamour of their jobs that they sometimes neglect their proper duties. 📍 91

Published rates: Double Room, \$315; Junior Suite, \$390. www.hospes.com

Carmona

IT IS A PLEASANT 65-MILE DRIVE west to the lovely white town of Carmona, a place with a dignified and quietly aristocratic character perched on a steep flat-topped hill. We paused to admire the view below, where the plain of the Guadalquivir River was striped with green bands of barley and alfalfa and punctuated with the pink blossoms of fruit and almond trees.

We had opted to stay at the **PARADOR DE CARMONA**, one of the traditional hotels that since the 1920s have provided travelers with comfortable and reasonably priced accommodations, often in historic buildings of memorable splendor. This particular parador occupies a 14th-century Moorish citadel built of gingerbread-colored stone, and is one of the loveliest in Spain.

Arriving in late morning, we received a warm welcome and were promptly escorted to our simple but extremely pleasant double room, which had a floor of foot-square



terra-cotta tiles, Moorish-lantern light fixtures and a bed with a cozy cotton coverlet. A pair of cushioned armchairs shared a good reading lamp and adjoined French doors that opened onto a balcony. The bath was snug but well-lit, attractively presented with white marble floors and Moorish-style tiles and equipped with double vanities and a combined tub and shower. Outside on our private balcony, a soft wind carried the bleating of lambs from a corral several hundred feet below. The view of a vast, undulating green plain, its contours blurred by a light spring haze, is one we've committed to memory for permanent delectation.

It was still too early in the year for a dip in the large outdoor pool, and guessing (correctly) that the food at the parador would be decent but not memorable, we strolled into town. There, we enjoyed an excellent lunch at the *Restaurante San Fernando* on the Calle Sacramento. Afterward, we set off on a long walk through the town's quiet cobbled streets, which are lined by baroque churches and whitewashed houses.

Apparently, there are plans to update the paradores, but many already provide exceptionally civilized bases from which to tour, solid comfort and unbeatable value for money. 🌿 87

Published rates: Double Room (with terrace), \$270; Double Room (with hydromassage tub), \$295. www.paradores-spain.com

Seville

THE MAGNIFICENT CITY of Seville, 24 miles west of Carmona, is the highlight of most trips to Andalusia. During high season, it can be unpleasantly crowded, but in early spring, even the streets around the huge Cathedral (the third-largest in Europe) were calm and orderly. Next to the Cathedral stands the extraordinary 12th-century tower, the Giralda, once the minaret of a Moorish mosque. As well as being a cultural capital (the birthplace of Velázquez and Murillo), Seville is renowned for its festivals, of which the most famous is *Semana Santa* (the Holy Week prior to Easter). Seville's Spring Fair, or *Feria*, begins two weeks later and runs for six days. Each morning, a parade of carriages conveys Seville's leading citizens to the bullring La Real Maestranza to join bullfighters and breeders. From around 9 p.m. on fairgrounds beside the Guadalquivir River, crowds dance, drink fino and eat tapas. Finally, in May, the colorful pilgrimage known as El Rocío leaves the gypsy barrio of Triana (the birthplace of flamenco) and heads out into the Doñana marshes. As many as a million pilgrims make the journey, some perched on covered wagons drawn by

oxen. The climax of the festival is the weekend before Pentecost (Sunday, May 31, 2009).

When Seville is teeming with high-season crowds, it is perhaps preferable to stay outside of the city in the serenity of the countryside. For many years, we have recommended the **HACIENDA BENAZUZA** (www.elbullihotel.com), a historic 10th-century mansion-estate 20 minutes west of the city. We also particularly like the **HACIENDA DE SAN RAFAEL** (www.haciendadesanrafael.com), a charming, family-owned country inn on a working farm 35 minutes south of Seville. On this occasion, however, we opted to stay in the center of town, within sight of the Cathedral.

The 60-room **EME FUSION HOTEL** opened around a year ago and is Seville's first modern boutique property. Just across the street from the Cathedral, the Alcázar and the Giralda, it initially seemed to be the type of self-consciously trendy place we usually find off-putting. But despite our skepticism, it proved to be a delightful hotel, and its location is nothing short of perfect. And once we'd had a chance to interact with the friendly young staff members, we found them to be good-humored and extremely hospitable.

The key to happiness is securing a room with a view, so reserve one of the "EME Advanced Rooms" and avoid those in the adjacent annex. With luck, you may be able to gaze at the golden Giralda, floodlit at night, while lounging in bed. The interior design of the rooms does not vary greatly, and all offer white walls, parquet floors, contemporary light fixtures, and chairs and sofas covered with charcoal-gray wool flannel. Baths are more functional than luxurious, and if you want a tub you should request one.

The Eme Fusion unquestionably has the most glamorous rooftop terrace in Seville, with unforgettable views of the Cathedral, several small plunge pools and the *Santo Terraza* restaurant/bar. The property also offers three other restaurants: *Santo* for Mediterranean cuisine; *Milagritos* for excellent tapas; and *Japo* for Japanese food. The latter can be quite welcome after a prolonged spell of traditional Spanish cooking, which can be heavy and slightly repetitive. The property also offers a pleasant spa with a small indoor pool. 🌿 89

Published rates: Deluxe Room, \$450; Junior Suite, \$550; Suite, \$685. www.emehotel.com


HEADING SOUTHEAST FROM SEVILLE, we drove for 55 miles toward the town of Villamartin. The **HOTEL CORTIJO SOTO REAL** is set on a magnificent 5,000-acre estate, and having entered its heavy iron gates, we continued through

olive groves for another 10 minutes before reaching the grand amber and white manor house. During the 1950s, the property was greatly extended by an Arab prince, who bred bulls and used it as a family retreat. In 2001, however, the property was sold to its current Belgian owner, who has since created a country house hotel with 25 rooms divided among the Palacio (which contains six stunning suites, including “El Torreón,” a tower suite with sweeping views over the surrounding countryside), the new Cortijo wing and the Plaza de Toros, a villa adjacent to an old bullfighting ring.

An excellent lunch on a sunny terrace overlooking the large swimming pool was followed by a long walk through the fields and then a dip in the indoor pool, part of a spacious spa that also includes a hammam, sauna, Jacuzzi and several jet showers. Before dinner, we decided to take a glass of *manzanilla* (a type of fino sherry) in the drawing room, and so happened upon the charming owner, who divides his time between this property and others in Namibia and Phoenix, Ariz. It quickly became apparent why this is such an exceptionally pleasant hotel, as he is a friendly and worldly man who is both a natural host and a connoisseur of fine hotels.

Our room in the Cortijo wing was spacious and beautifully designed, with ochre-painted walls, Moorish-

style lattice doors and terra-cotta floors. In addition to a separate sitting area, it had a private terrace. A lavish bath provided a whirlpool tub and Hermes toiletries.

Activities on the estate include mountain biking, partridge shooting and riding. As well as a selection of pure Spanish and Spanish-Arabian horses, the hotel has two horse-drawn carriages available for picnics.  **95**

Published rates: Superior Room, \$495; Junior Suite, \$560; Suite, \$645.
www.hotelcortijosotoreal.com

Ronda

NO VISIT TO ANDALUSIA is complete without a brief stop at a sherry bodega in Jerez. The city lies 35 miles south of Villamartin, and its name comes from the Arabic “Sherish,” from which the English word “sherry” is derived. Jerez has been at the center of a wine-growing area for centuries, and despite the fact that drinking alcohol is forbidden in the Koran, in 966 the Caliph of Córdoba was prevailed upon to spare the vineyards on the grounds that they also provided raisins for his soldiers!

After a 70-mile drive east from Jerez, we came to the extraordinarily picturesque town of Ronda, situated 2,500 feet above sea level on either side of “El Tajo,” the dramatic 390-foot gorge of the Guadalevín River. Ronda’s native son, Francisco Romero, laid down the rules of bullfighting in 1695 and the town is the site of the oldest ring in Spain, built in 1784. This history brought Hemingway to the old walled town, La Ciudad, where he became a part-time resident.

The **HOTEL LA FUENTE DE LA HIGUERA** is an unusual property tucked away in rolling hills amid olive groves, 10 minutes outside of Ronda. Although it is by no means a conventional luxury hotel, it proved a place that we were exceptionally sorry to leave. The rooms are attractively decorated with ivory walls, white-painted wood floors, antique furniture, ceiling fans and mosquito nets over wrought-iron beds. Ours also had a spacious private terrace and a working fireplace.

The real charm of the place, however, is that it doesn’t feel like a hotel and yet manages to deliver service and comfort of a very high standard. Publicity seems to be mostly by word-of-mouth, so you’re likely to cross paths with some extremely interesting and entertaining people. Delicious dinners (featuring fruit, vegetables and herbs from the hotel’s grounds) invariably lasted well into the night.

After a morning’s sightseeing, we loved coming home to the sun loungers next to the small swimming pool in the attractively landscaped garden ablaze with flowers.

Andalusian Restaurants

EXPERIMENTAL CATALAN CHEF Ferran Adrià has had an immense influence on contemporary Spanish cuisine. Perhaps his most positive contribution has been to embolden talented young chefs such as Benito Gómez at the excellent **Restaurante Tragabuches** in Ronda (C/ José Aparicio 1). Looking for a light lunch, we found this contemporary establishment just off the touristy Plaza España. The maître d’hôtel couldn’t have been more accommodating: “Of course you can order two starters as a meal.” Nothing prepared us for the excellence of the Iberian ham rolls stuffed with mixed salad leaves and served with an airy cream sauce, or the superb *fideus*, Catalan-style durum-wheat vermicelli, accompanied by small chunks of grilled squid.

A few days later, we had a similarly outstanding meal at **Az-Zait** (Plaza San Lorenzo 1) in Seville. A charming waitress welcomed us to this richly decorated dining room, where we feasted on Antonio Conejero’s coddled eggs with octopus and truffles; artichoke hearts stuffed with veal in béchamel sauce; and rack of lamb with couscous and a light chocolate sauce.

La Fuente de la Higuera provides a happy illustration of the fact that less can often be more. ✈ 90

Published rates: Double Room, \$205; Junior Suite, \$245; Luxury Suite, \$290.
www.hotellafuente.com

Granada

THE FINAL STOP on our tour was the fabled city of Granada, located 116 miles northeast of Ronda in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Granada is a place that suffers from a surfeit of admirers. For much of the year, the tourist buses disgorge their multitudes, and the magic of the place evaporates. Out of season, however, it is still possible to revel in the exquisite beauty of the Alhambra (“Red Fortress”) and the Generalife (“Architect’s Garden”), the final flowering of Moorish architectural and decorative genius.

Despite Granada’s fame and splendor, its hotels have always been very disappointing. In particular, its parador is crowded, overrated and staffed by people who know that it will always be full, however inefficient and disagreeable they may be. So we were very curious to explore the **PALACIO DE LOS PATOS**, a 42-room property in the heart of the city.

This stately yellow Belle Epoque villa is named after the *patos* (ducks) that paddle around the pool in its pretty gardens. The preferred rooms are those in the villa itself, as the new annex may have a striking modern façade but inside it is dark and lacking in charm. Our Junior Suite retained its original chestnut floors and painted ceiling, but its furnishings were decidedly contemporary, with a leather chaise longue and honeycomb-pattern area rug. White marble sinks and a marble tub contrasted with the black slate floor in the roomy bath.

Spacious, airy and light, these rooms are a fine choice for anyone who doesn’t want to channel Washington Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra*, since the mood here is bold and innovative rather than romantic and elegiac. Though the center city location can be a little noisy, at the end of a day’s touring it is pleasant to return to an indoor pool and a sauna. However, the Alhambra is a 10-minute cab ride away.

The hotel’s restaurant is one of the best in town, and the dish not to miss is the rack of suckling pig served with apple purée and potatoes stuffed with green pepper. The young staff members are efficiency and charm personified. ✈ 89

Published rates: Deluxe Room, \$390; Junior Suite, \$460; Suite, \$560.
www.hospes.com

Mediterranean Golf Heaven

DURING THE PAST DECADE, Spain’s Costa del Sol has experienced a building boom that has dotted its countryside with villa complexes of little distinction. Fortunately, there are exceptions to this depressing pattern. The 67-room **FINCA CORTESIN HOTEL**, the latest project of American hotelier David Stein, is a real standout for both visual elegance and gorgeous décor. Located close to the Mediterranean, just below the white town of Casares, the hotel also anchors a world-class golf resort.

An amiable receptionist escorted us to our wonderfully spacious Junior Suite, which opened onto a large outdoor terrace. Its main room was light, white and high-ceilinged, with sea-grass area rugs on buff limestone floors. A bleached-pine armoire displayed an intriguing Joseph Cornell-like collection of miscellaneous objects. The double bed was made up in Egyptian cotton sheets and had a tufted *toile de Jouy* headboard. Lighting throughout the suite (including the terrace) was impeccable. A limestone-floored bath came with a stall shower, an extra-long soaking tub and English Penhaligon’s toiletries. (Be sure to request a room with a view, since on clear days it is thrilling to be able to see both Gibraltar and Morocco.)

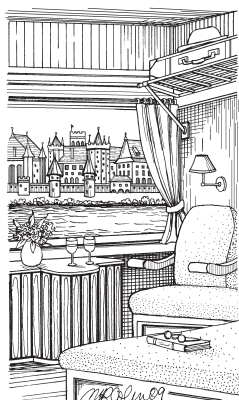
The Finca Cortesin has two exceptional restaurants: *El Jardin* serves traditional, seasonal Spanish food in a casual setting, while the *Restaurant Schilo* offers haute cuisine by two-star Dutch chef Schilo Van Coevorden.

Most guests come to play the magnificent new 18-hole golf course designed by Cabell B. Robinson. (Born in Washington, D.C., Robinson has spent most of his professional life in Europe, working for 17 years alongside Robert Trent Jones on projects such as the famed Valderrama course, before setting up on his own in 1987.) Though we weren’t able to take to the links during our visit — it was too windy — Spanish friends have assured us that it is now regarded as one of the top five courses in the country. And beginning this year, it will host the Volvo World Match Play Championship, formerly held at Wentworth outside London. Superb practice facilities are offered by the Jack Nicklaus Academy.

Kept indoors by the weather, we very much enjoyed the huge indoor saltwater pool at the spa, along with its sauna, hammam and bloodcurdling “snow room,” a sort of a human deep-freeze. All told, the Finca Cortesin Hotel is a terrific new resort that is a worthy destination in its own right, or an ideal time-out from a tour of southern Spain. ✈ 94

Published rates: Superior Room, \$560; Junior Suite, \$620.
www.fincacortesin.com

Berlin to Budapest by Luxury Train



DURING A LEISURELY four-day journey through central Europe aboard the Old World's newest luxury train, we discovered the historic cities, unspoiled countryside and dramatic mountain scenery of Poland and Slovakia.

The new *Danube Express* is the brainchild of Howard Trinder, an English rail buff who formerly ran the well-respected company Great Rail Journeys. Trinder has now gone into partnership with MAV Nostalgalia, the "heritage" branch of Hungarian State Railways, which, as the name suggests, aims to recreate train travel experiences from an earlier age.

We decided to sign up for one of the train's central European itineraries, "The Polish Explorer," a journey from Berlin to Budapest by way of Gdansk, Malbork, Kraków, Zakopane and Kosice. The beginning of our trip was inauspicious. We were unimpressed by the arrangements preceding our departure: There should have been a welcome cocktail party to let passengers get acquainted; dinner in the hotel dining room was mediocre;

and, inexcusably, the drinks were not included. However, when we first glimpsed the *Danube Express's* shiny blue and ivory carriages on the following afternoon, we felt our former enthusiasm return.

Attila, a friendly young Hungarian who spoke perfect English, welcomed us aboard. While we settled into our attractively appointed "Deluxe" compartment, he served tea and explained that the carriage had previously been in the service of the Hungarian postal service and had been revamped at a cost of \$800,000. Apparently, the dining and lounge cars were built in Bautzen, East Germany, in the 1980s, and the "Classic" sleeping cars were made in Hungary during the 1950s. Many of the latter were part of the train used by the communist government, which explains why they were so impeccably maintained.

We instantly felt at home in our elegant and surprisingly spacious (84 square feet) new quarters, where a Mittel-European atmosphere was engendered by handsome oak paneling and gold and burgundy carpeting. Made up for day travel, our compartment had two comfortable armchairs upholstered in maroon and cream-striped damask. A large brass luggage rack easily accommodated our two suitcases. And a wall-mounted cabinet and shelves proved more than adequate for stowing our books, miscellaneous sightseeing gear and toiletry bags. A pair of long-stemmed red roses in a bud vase on the built-in wooden table below the window was our first experience of the *Danube Express's* admirable attention to detail. However, what impressed us most was the compartment's well-lit bath, equipped with a comfortably proportioned stall shower (with a wall-mounted head and lots of hot water), a hairdryer, good-quality towels and English toiletries.

As the train rolled smoothly out of the station, we decided to drink a toast to our departure and headed for the stately lounge car, an extra-long carriage with polished wooden side chairs and white linen tablecloths held in place by solid old-fashioned brass lamps. Over flutes of sparkling Hungarian wine, we met Apollo, a gregarious pianist with a luxuriant mustache and an inexhaustible repertoire, and our fellow passengers, who were British, American and Canadian.

Aside from the comfort of the train — the ride was impressively smooth and quiet — the biggest surprise of the day was the beauty of the Polish landscape just before sunset. In contrast to the generally unkempt rail sidings



of the United States, those in Poland were remarkably tidy, and just beyond the tracks, the countryside was a lovely patchwork of wheat fields, fruit orchards and gardens filled with rows of jade-green cabbages. Perhaps because the history of post-communist Poland is indelibly associated with Lech Walesa and the Gdansk shipyards, we had expected the view to be industrial. But instead, Poland offered an enchanting prewar landscape of forests, small farms and well-scrubbed villages with a stork's nest on virtually every chimney.

Dinner was served from 7 p.m. in two charming old-fashioned dining cars at linen-dressed tables configured for two and four people. The food, freshly prepared by the train's Hungarian cooks, was hearty and delicious. Our meal began with delicate crêpes filled with wild mushrooms and garnished with sour cream, followed

Nothing could have prepared us for the medieval majesty of Malbork's massive brick citadel on the banks of the Nogat River

by preserved goose leg with mashed potatoes and red cabbage, and an excellent cherry cake for dessert. The three Hungarian house wines included in the tour price were a crisp Badaszony Riesling, a full-bodied Szeremley Ovoros red, and a white Tokaji Furmint. All were excellent and generously served, but there was also a short list of better (mostly Hungarian) bottles, including a superb "five puttyonyos" (extremely sweet) Tokaji, which we ordered with dessert one night. After dinner, our fellow passengers began trading tales about the world's other luxury trains and a consensus emerged that so far the *Danube Express* measured up to its competitors and that not being obliged to don formalwear for dinner (as is often the case on similar journeys) was a considerable relief.

Shortly after we had returned to our compartment, Attila came to take an order for early-morning tea or coffee. Our chairs had been converted into a pair of twin beds, dressed with white cotton sheets and topped with fluffy comforters. Wall-mounted brass lamps would have made it possible to read in bed, but the soothing effect of the train's gentle rocking meant that our good books went unopened.

After breakfast, we pulled into the charming Prussian-style station of Malbork (Marienburg). Though we had read that Malbork had been a stronghold of the Teutonic

Knights (a German religious order that escorted pilgrims to the Holy Land) during the 12th century, nothing could have prepared us for the medieval majesty of its massive brick citadel on the banks of the Nogat River. In 1410, the Knights were besieged by a Polish/Lithuanian army, but the castle was so ingeniously designed and self-sufficient (with a dairy, vegetable gardens, several wells and massive storage rooms) that it held out for more than 40 years. An animated guide greatly enlivened our visit, discreetly filling in the gaping holes in our knowledge of Polish history.

Following a light lunch aboard the train, we reached nearby Gdansk in the early afternoon. Expecting a rusty and dilapidated port, we were instead charmed to discover a beautiful Hanseatic city with streets of fine gabled houses (a legacy of its long commercial relationship with Holland). Gdansk still possesses the grace that comes from a long and cosmopolitan history — it once hosted a Scottish community of 30,000, as well as a sizeable French population of wine merchants — and we left with real regret. The extremely affable atmosphere at dinner on the train that night reflected a prevailing mood of satisfaction at the end of a fine day out.

A pattern had been established for the rest of the trip, during which we visited the exquisite Polish city of Kraków (for a full report on our time there, see *Hideaway Report Online* at www.andrewharper.com); Zakopane, the so-called "winter capital" of Poland in the Carpathian Mountains; and Kosice, the second city of Slovakia with its 14th-century Gothic cathedral and recently restored art deco synagogue.

When he brought early tea on our final morning, Attila immediately asked if he could open the window shade. "You must not miss," he said. As he raised the canvas, we saw that the train was running along a steep hillside that commanded extraordinary views of Slovakia's Tatra Mountains, rising from a sea of autumn foliage. Our journey ended in Budapest, in the ormolu-decorated private waiting rooms of the Hapsburg emperors.

Overall, the *Danube Express* is a very special and impressively comfortable travel experience. It is also a convenient way to see areas of central Europe that are still a challenge to visit as an independent traveler. The expertise of the *Danube Express* company is running a luxury train, at which they do a fine job. It is less adept at land arrangements other than simple sightseeing, and its choice of hotels is uninspired.

Published rate for four-day, three-night "Polish Explorer" itinerary: Classic Sleeping Car (with air-conditioning and shared bath), \$4,565 per person, all meals, house wines and sightseeing included. Deluxe Sleeping Car (with air-conditioning and private bath), \$5,440. www.danube-express.com

Things You Should Know

ONE&ONLY *Cape Town* — The ranks of South Africa's notable hotels will be augmented this month by the opening of this contemporary urban resort of 91 rooms and suites, in the heart of the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. All rooms will offer oversize baths and a 24-hour butler service. Two culinary titans, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa and Gordon Ramsay, will preside over *Nobu* and *Maze*, respectively. And a lavish spa, located on a landscaped island, will provide 12 private treatment villas. www.oneandonlyresorts.com

VERDURA *Sicily* — Summer 2009 will see the opening of this lavish new golf and spa resort, the latest venture of hotelier Rocco Forte and his sister, renowned interior designer Olga Polizzi. The 203 stylish guest rooms all offer views over the Mediterranean from private terraces. Two 18-hole golf courses have been designed by American Kyle Phillips. The state-of-the-art spa has 11 treatment rooms, a yoga room and hammam. www.verduraresort.com.

FOUR SEASONS SEYCHELLES — This new resort of 67 villas and suites overlooking a white-sand beach on Mahé in the exquisite Seychelles archipelago is the second Four Seasons property to open in the Indian Ocean during recent months. To the south, the Four Seasons Mauritius at Anahita now offers 123 villas and residences, plus an Ernie Els-designed championship golf course with six oceanfront holes. www.fourseasons.com

M/V AQUA *Peru* — Travel on the Amazon has been transformed by this new 130-foot luxury cruise ship. The vessel has just 12 oversize air-conditioned suites with panoramic windows, king-size beds and fully equipped baths. The cuisine, under the supervision of noted Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, is backed by an extensive list of South American wines and is served with crystal and fine china. The 24 fortunate passengers are accompanied by three naturalist-guides. www.aquaexpeditions.com

AMANTAKA *Laos* — These are heady times for Aman junkies. Following the opening of acclaimed properties in Beijing and New Delhi, two new resorts are in the works for summer/fall 2009. Amantaka, close to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Luang Prabang on the Mekong River, is scheduled to debut in July, while Aman Sveti Stefan in Montenegro is accepting reservations from August. www.amanresorts.com

WOLWEDANS *Namibia* — Set amid the astonishing and unearthly landscape of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Boulders Camp is the latest addition to the Wolwedans collection of desert lodges and camps. Four luxurious bedroom tents, plus a stylishly appointed lounge tent, provide the ultimate wilderness experience. The Dunes Lodge and Private Camp at Wolwedans have also been comprehensively renovated. www.wolwedans.com

 For an explanation of hotel ratings, check the *Hideaway Report Online* on the member web site.

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Sounding Off

FOR ME, GOOD FOOD and wine are best enjoyed as an accompaniment to lively conversation. This is why one of the banes of my existence is noisy restaurants. On numerous occasions lately, I have found myself at expensive establishments completely unable to hear a word that was being said. (In case you were wondering, there are no other obvious signs of my going deaf.)

I first became aware of the problem at the beginning of the 1990s. I had been invited to a London restaurant called *Kensington Place*, then fashionable because it was a favorite lunch spot of the late Princess of Wales. I clearly remember fixing my attention on the waitress and doing my best to lip-read what she was trying to tell me, but it was impossible to hear a single dish among "Today's Specials," thanks to the cacophony reverberating from plate-glass windows and a bare floor.

Over subsequent years, more and more hotels have installed restaurants gleaming with chrome and glass, and I find myself positively nostalgic for the heavy wallpaper and red velvet banquettes of a previous era.

On a recent visit to New York, I met up with an old friend at *A Voce*, a restaurant with an outstanding young chef and a contemporary design. As we chatted, I found myself leaning ever farther over the table to hear him. The last straw, however, came on the way out, when I mentioned the problem to an employee. Apparently it was all deliberate. If the restaurant seemed "lively," he went on, it would come to be regarded as a "hot place." The idea that my discomfort had been part of a marketing strategy only added insult to injury. Henceforth, I will only be recommending restaurants to *Hideaway Report* readers that strive to take the din out of dinner.

—Andrew Harper