



# Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report®

Opinionated reviews by a writer who travels incognito and always pays his own way

## A Journey From St. Petersburg Through the Baltic States



THE BALTIC IS EUROPE'S SECRET SEA. Although little known compared with the Mediterranean, it is a similarly vital and ancient crossroads of European culture, commerce and history. Today, the region's major focal point is the former Russian capital, St. Petersburg,

founded by Czar Peter the Great in 1703.

However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 which resulted in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania regaining their independence, the Baltic republics to the south have become fascinating destinations in their own right. And surprisingly for countries that were so recently behind the Iron Curtain, they also delight their visitors with warm hospitality, excellent hotels and delicious food.

Referring to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as “the Baltics” tends to mask their very different identities. Estonia actually has more in common with its Nordic neighbors than it does with the two other Baltic countries. Like Finland, the country has a booming economy based on high-tech industries, including Skype, the Internet phone service. (*The New York Times* once referred to Estonia as “Silicon Valley on the Baltic Sea.”) Latvia is perhaps the most cosmopolitan of the three, while Lithuania is the most rural and conservative.

Several cruise lines offer Baltic itineraries that put into St. Petersburg, Tallinn and Riga, with side trips to Vilnius, the inland capital of Lithuania. However, we recently opted to explore the region with a car and driver. On a land journey, you inevitably see a great deal more and gain deeper insight than would be possible on a brief port call. To visit the region in comfort, we recommend a trip of at least 12 days. Most itineraries begin in St. Petersburg, as the Russian city has many more connecting flights to the major European gateways than the smaller Baltic capitals. As road conditions and driving habits vary widely, a chauffeur is advisable. The best season for a Baltic trip is from May to August, since winters are very cold and fall and spring are often rainy.

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BUILT ALONG THE BANKS of the Neva River, Russia's second city is spectacularly beautiful, with immense neoclassical palaces painted in distinctive pastel colors, and punctuated by the glinting golden domes of Orthodox churches. (St. Isaac's Cathedral has the largest gold-plated dome in the world.) The city was originally constructed on more than 100 islands in the Neva estuary, and today there are 342 major bridges spanning its remarkable network of canals. In addition to its architectural splendor, the city also contains one of the world's greatest museums, the Hermitage, which comprises six buildings that include the Winter Palace, former residence of Russia's czars. As well as the Russian Imperial regalia and a remarkable collection of Fabergé jewelry, the Hermitage houses more than three million paintings. Today, St. Petersburg has regained its status as a European cultural capital. The highlight of the year is the "Stars of the White Nights" (May 11 – July 20, 2008), an international festival of opera and ballet held at the Mariinsky Theater.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, St. Petersburg was regarded as a place tainted by Westernization, and in Soviet eyes it was only rehabilitated by the epic 900-day siege during World War II, during which 1.2 million citizens perished (40 percent of the prewar population). Hitler had been so confident of victory that he had invitations printed for a celebratory ball at the Hotel Astoria, one of which is on display at the City Museum.

## Hotel Astoria

FOR THOSE WHO CAN STILL REMEMBER the hotels of communist Leningrad, the echoing concrete piles with their grim-faced, silently watching staff, the choice that now awaits the traveler to St. Petersburg is little short of astounding. Although we still recommend the lavish



**GRAND HOTEL EUROPE** ([www.grandhoteleurope.com](http://www.grandhoteleurope.com)), its atmosphere has been adversely affected by an increasing number of tour groups. Our allegiance has therefore shifted to the Hotel Astoria, owned by British hotelier Sir Rocco Forte and decorated by his sister Olga Polizzi, one of the most talented hotel designers currently working in Europe.

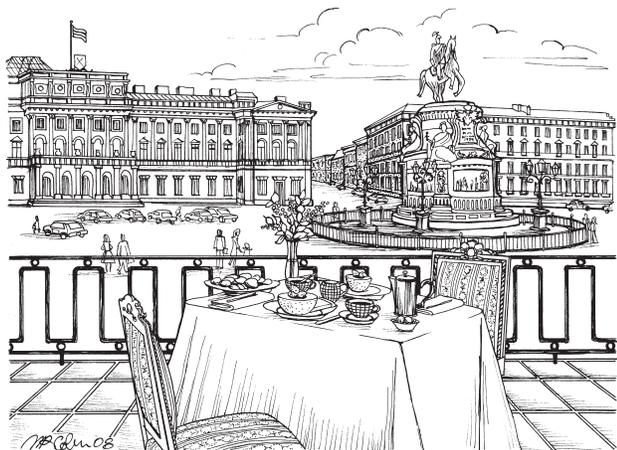
Built in 1912, the Astoria offers a perfect location within an easy walk of the Hermitage. Today, its *Rotonda Lounge* is one of the most glamorous places in the city to sample delicious freshly made blinis, accompanied by dark Russian tea served from a brass samovar. The hotel's 213 rooms and suites are light, spacious and stylish. If you're only staying for a night or two, Superior Deluxe Rooms with views of St. Isaac's Cathedral (spectacularly illuminated at night) offer gracious and comfortable accommodations. (The best views are in the sequence from #715 to #724.) For longer stays, you should consider a Classic or Junior Suite. All rooms have herringbone oak parquet floors, crown moldings and beds made up with good-quality Russian linens. They are furnished with an appealing mix of 1930s wooden furniture, modern overstuffed armchairs and sofas, and contemporary accessories such as striking spherical glass table lamps. Double-glazed windows, plasma-screen televisions and convenient Internet access are among the welcome amenities.

The hotel's *Davidov Restaurant* offers an impressive menu of contemporary and Russian cuisine. As well as a "Russian Table" of salads, pickles and caviar, typical dishes might include zander (pike perch) with brown butter and walnut sauce, and crab and lobster *pelmenis* (a kind of Russian ravioli). Other facilities include a pleasant spa and a well-equipped workout room. Despite being a sizeable hotel, the Astoria possesses a reserved, polite, old-fashioned atmosphere. Superior Deluxe Double, \$570-\$930, depending on time of year; Single, \$515-\$845. Junior Suite, \$920-\$1,330. Tel. (7) 812-494-5757. Email: [reservations.astoria@roccofortecollection.com](mailto:reservations.astoria@roccofortecollection.com)

## Taleon Imperial Hotel

THE OBVIOUS CHOICE FOR ANYONE wanting a taste of czarist grandeur is this 29-room property, housed within the Eliseev Palace. Originally built for a wealthy merchant family in the mid-19th Century, the opulently decorated mansion is ideally located at the intersection of the Moika River and the city's principal avenue, Nevsky Prospekt. Converted into a hotel in 2003, it has state-of-the-art facilities, including an indoor swimming pool and spa. (A private club with a small casino occupies the same

premises.) The tone is immediately set by the reception area, with its elaborately painted ceiling, low lighting and beautifully carved mantelpiece. The hotel's best rooms overlook the Moika River, and Superior Doubles #410 and #411, both appointed with king-size beds and whirlpool baths, offer particularly good value. Suites are unusually



spacious and are decorated in the resplendent aristocratic style found throughout the hotel. Their lush drawing rooms feature swagged windows, oil paintings, intricate stucco moldings, wall sconces and crystal chandeliers from the pages of Tolstoy or Pushkin. The only rooms we do not recommend are the two Junior Suites that have been inconveniently configured as duplexes. All accommodations come with lavish marble baths.

The *Taleon Restaurant* is one of the best in the city and is very popular with well-heeled locals. Chef Alexander Dregolsky's menu offers elaborate French and Russian dishes complemented by an extensive wine list featuring a wide range of classic red Bordeaux. The two dining rooms are decorated in Louis XVI and Empire styles respectively, and even by the hotel's prevailing standard are lavish in the extreme. But ultimately, for all of its opulence, the real luxury of the Taleon Imperial is its atmosphere: This hotel couldn't be anywhere else in the world but St. Petersburg. Superior Double, \$695; Superior Suite, \$905; Luxury Studio Suite (river view), \$1,805. Tel. (7) 812-324-9911. [www.eliseevpalacehotel.com](http://www.eliseevpalacehotel.com)



LOCATED FOUR AND A HALF HOURS to the southwest, the Estonian capital, Tallinn, has emerged as one of the most delightful destinations in the Baltic countries. Its old town is one of the best-preserved in Europe and is surrounded by thick medieval walls punctuated by imposing watchtowers. Having escaped from a much-hated 45-year Soviet bear hug, Tallinn now offers

a pre-war cityscape, lively café life, excellent restaurants and fascinating, imaginatively presented museums.

## The Three Sisters Hotel

SINCE IT OPENED IN 2003, the 23-room Three Sisters Hotel has quickly become Tallinn's most highly regarded property. It is where Britain's Queen Elizabeth II opted to stay during her visit in 2006, and it is easy to see why. More than any other of the city's hotels, it reflects the traditional character of the Estonian capital. Located on a cobbled medieval street just a brief walk from many of the most interesting attractions, it has been created from three tall, gabled merchants' houses dating from 1362.

The young staff members are charmingly proud of their fluent English and greet Americans with quiet warmth. (Most Estonians credit their country's freedom to American persistence during the Cold War). Adjacent to reception, several attractive lounges provide pleasant places to relax at the end of a day's sightseeing. However, much of the drama at this hotel is to be found upstairs. There, you'll discover a sophisticated mix of historical and contemporary décor. Every room is individually decorated, but all combine a refined Scandinavian aesthetic with exposed beams, parquet floors, antique furniture and traditional Nordic comfort in the form of goose-down duvets. This appealing environment is enhanced by state-of-the-art electronics and handsome slate baths with power showers. Our favorite lodgings are the suites in the attic, particularly the so-called "Red Room." This has special charm, thanks to its many dormer windows

## Recommended Russian Guides

SINCE ST. PETERSBURG IS SPREAD OUT and its tourism is chiefly geared to groups, it can be a challenging place for the independent traveler. This is one city where you will definitely need a guide, plus a car and driver. Opening hours are quirky, and few museum attendants speak English. Furthermore, certain attractions can only be accessed through a guide, including the spectacular collection of Czarist jewels in the basement of the Hermitage museum. We were escorted by Tatyana Churikova and Olga Miniuk. Both of these agreeable and helpful women speak very good English and possess a vast knowledge of the city and its history. They can also arrange for a chauffeur-driven car at better rates than those offered by hotels. Contact Tatyana through her website, [www.tour-stpetersburg.com](http://www.tour-stpetersburg.com) and Olga at [OlgaMiniuk@mail.ru](mailto:OlgaMiniuk@mail.ru)

and skylights. High up in the roof, it is delightful to drift off to sleep listening to the cries of seagulls.

One of the more surprising amenities at the hotel is its outstanding 3,000-bottle wine cellar. The owner is an ardent oenophile, and you can enjoy his first-rate choices in the wine bar or over dinner in the charming restaurant. There, chef Aleksander Fedin serves up delicious French-inspired dishes such as baby trout with duxelles, béarnaise sauce and ratatouille, and Estonian beef tournedos with cream of cauliflower and red onion chutney. Though the Three Sisters might not be considered a true luxury hotel in New York or London, it is nonetheless tremendously comfortable, and a well-drilled staff is consistently eager to make you feel at home. Deluxe Double, \$625; Grand Deluxe, \$720; Junior Suite, \$815. Tel. (372) 630-6300. Email : [info@threesistershotel.com](mailto:info@threesistershotel.com)

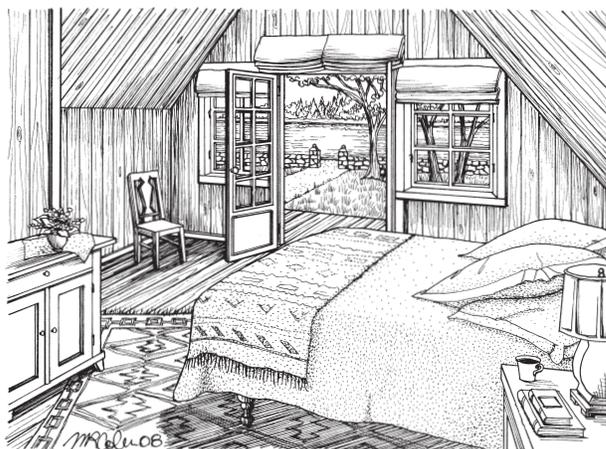
## Padaste Manor

IT IS A PLEASANT TWO-HOUR DRIVE south from Tallinn to the port of Virtsu, where you board a ferry for the hour-long crossing to the tiny island of Muhu. Once the seat of German aristocrats, Padaste Manor has been lovingly restored by Dutchman Martin Breuer and Estonian Imre Sooäär, and their easygoing sophistication has created a truly delightful hotel. (Imre is also a member of the Estonian parliament.) Set right at the edge of the Baltic, the U-shaped compound comprises an original 18th-Century manor house (currently being restored) and two wings of fieldstone outbuildings that survey a tree-shaded lawn. Bordering the sea is a marsh where swans may be seen gliding gracefully through the reeds.

Currently, the best rooms are the duplex Junior Suites with private balconies overlooking the main lawn. (The manor house will reopen in summer 2008, adding a dozen or so luxurious new suites to the property.) They are comfortably furnished, with beds topped by feather duvets under Estonian linen coverlets. Cozy sitting rooms come with overstuffed chairs and couches, good lighting and CD players. Baths are spacious and well-lit. If you're traveling with a group of friends, or as a family, you should book the private farmhouse, with its own kitchen (you can ask the hotel's chef to prepare private dinners), three bedrooms, a media room, a private sauna and four large baths, three of which have deep claw-footed tubs. The two-story farmstead has a big woodburning fireplace and is appointed with a delightful mixture of contemporary furniture and Estonian antiques. The front porch (provided with rocking chairs and chaise longues) is a perfect place to spend a tranquil afternoon with a book.

At dusk, the grounds of the estate are lit with oil-burning torches, and dinner is served in a charming stone building beside the sea. During good weather, it is an almost indescribable pleasure to settle into one of the wicker tub chairs, to listen to the nightingales and to sample such delicious dishes as Estonian mushroom soup, goat cheese-stuffed ravioli in pumpkin sauce, and steamed turbot with peas. Martin Breuer has assembled one of the best wine lists in the Baltics, and service is prompt and charming.

The hotel's principal amenity is a wonderful spa, which offers a variety of indigenous treatments, including wraps employing local mud (the natives have been daubing themselves with the stuff for centuries to cure rheumatism, arthritis and other ailments), "baths" in newly mown hay



and a relaxing soak in seawater heated by a woodburning stove. Since Muhu is flat, it is perfect terrain for cycling excursions to local villages, which offer a snapshot of traditional island life. Essentially, however, Padaste is an ideal place in which to do nothing. Superior Double, \$430; Superior Junior Suite, \$570. Private Farmhouse, \$1,275 for two, plus \$75 each for up to six additional people. Tel. (372) 454-8800. Email: [info@padaste.ee](mailto:info@padaste.ee)



THE JOURNEY FROM TALLINN to Riga, capital of Latvia, is three hours on excellent roads through unspoiled countryside. A port city of close to a million inhabitants, Riga is the most visibly prosperous of the Baltic capitals, and its superb architecture reflects the fact that for centuries it has been an important and strategic city. Its medieval core is a wonderful place to explore on foot, but there are two other areas that definitely shouldn't be missed. In and around Elizabetes Street, Riga has the greatest concentration of art nouveau buildings in Europe, and these marvelous old houses (built in both

the sinuous, floral French style and the more geometric Germanic *Jugendstil*) are breathtaking for their elegance and architectural wit. The other must-see is the city's main market, which occupies a complex of four huge concrete-and-steel barrel-vaulted hangars, originally built in the 1920s to house Zeppelin airships. Each pavilion specializes in a different kind of food — smoked fish, dairy and so forth — and the visitor has the impression of being surrounded by the world's largest delicatessen.

## Hotel Bergs

OCCUPYING A THREE-STORY BRICK BUILDING in a stylish center-city neighborhood, the 38-room Hotel Bergs is Riga's most fashionable hotel. It was originally built by Kristaps Bergs, a well-known local entrepreneur, who developed a former cabbage patch into an avant-garde complex of shops and businesses at the beginning of the 20th Century. After the Russian occupation, the property was expropriated by the Soviet state and fell into disrepair until Bergs' descendants recovered it in 1991.

Decidedly contemporary in appearance, the Bergs nonetheless offers solid comfort. The public spaces have checkerboard tile floors and are decorated with an attractive mixture of Latvian antiques, contemporary art and African masks. Rooms are light, spacious and done up in a minimalist style, with dark wooden floors, locally made white linen curtains, and sofas upholstered in ash-gray woolen flannel. Though visually sleek, they're surprisingly cozy and very well-equipped with plasma-screen televisions, DVD/CD players and kitchenettes. Among the various room categories, we particularly liked the roomy "Loft Suites," which are duplex rooms with mezzanine bedrooms reached by wooden circular staircases.

Although we generally prefer urban hotels that more vividly express the historical personalities of their surroundings, the Bergs grew on us during the course of our two-night stay. Its young staff is eager to please, and the hotel has a lively café, an excellent restaurant and a well-equipped workout room with a sauna. All in all, it is a well-run and extremely pleasant property, even if you normally prefer more traditional lodgings. Loft Suite for one or two, \$410; Penthouse Suite, \$510. Tel. (371) 777-0900. Email: [hotelbergs@hotelbergs.lv](mailto:hotelbergs@hotelbergs.lv)



AT A MINIMUM, the drive from Riga to Vilnius takes three hours, but it is well worth making a side trip to Rundale Palace in Latvia (40 minutes off of the main highway)

before crossing the border into Lithuania. This stunning baroque edifice was constructed from 1730-1760 and is the work of Italian architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli, who designed many of St. Petersburg's most famous buildings, including the Hermitage.

Quieter than Tallinn or Riga, Vilnius is a handsome city, its skyline dominated by church spires and steeples. As well as a charming and historic center, it has numerous delightful parks and gardens.

## Stikliai Hotel

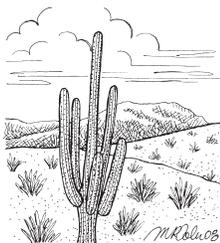
IDEALLY LOCATED AT THE HEART of the Old Town, the Stikliai, named for the *stikliai* (glass-blowers) who once worked here, is a complex of remodeled 16th-Century houses set around a glass-roofed atrium that contains the hotel's excellent restaurant. The region's best-known hotel (the only member of Relais & Chateaux in the Baltic republics) has an interior that provides an unexpected trip to Provence, thanks to French country furnishings and acres of floral chintz.

Though the 44 accommodations are not particularly spacious, they are cozy and comfortable. We especially recommend the Junior Suites, which consist of pleasant sitting rooms with a couches and arm chairs, plus bedroom alcoves. Though our room offered genuine comfort and character compared with those of other Vilnius hotels, some details were lacking. The single TV was in the bedroom alcove, for example, making it impossible to watch television in the sitting area. And the bath was small, with a single vanity and generic Polish-made Relais & Chateaux toiletries.

Having stayed at the Stikliai before, we also noticed a slight decline in the level of service. Of late, the atmosphere of the hotel has also been adversely affected by its increasing popularity with a free-spending Russian clientele. Though we ate exceedingly well in the gourmet restaurant, which serves delicious French food along with a few Lithuanian dishes, our meal was marred by a large, noisy table of Russians celebrating a birthday with astonishing quantities of Scotch.

Overall, however, we're inclined to see the glass as half-full at this plush little outpost of aspiring Gallic luxury, thanks to a lovely indoor pool and sauna, as well as an attractive library and bar. Note: The Kempinski hotel group is currently renovating a handsome 19th-Century building adjacent to the city's cathedral. This 107-room property is scheduled to open early in 2009 and may provide the Stikliai with some beneficial competition. Deluxe Double, \$360; Junior Suite, \$505; Suite, \$675.

## Stylish Spa Resorts in the Inspiring American Southwest



AN EXPONENTIAL INCREASE in the number of destination spas has been the most consistent trend in luxury travel over recent years.

Pioneers in the field such as the legendary **CANYON RANCH** ([www.canyonranch.com](http://www.canyonranch.com)), 15 miles northeast of Tucson, tended to be relatively austere, with an insistent emphasis on fitness and weight loss, as well as a stern prohibition of all forms of alcohol. But nowadays, the spa experience is becoming ever more imaginative and diverse.

Of nowhere is this truer than in the Southwest. There, new spa resorts offer not just mud wraps and exercise regimens, but the promise of spiritual tranquility, as well as a heightened appreciation of the majestic desert landscape, flooded by the golden light that illuminates many of Georgia O'Keeffe's vivid and sensuous paintings. New Mexico's spas in particular often pay homage to the heritage of local tribes, with treatments incorporating indigenous materials and ceremonies, as well as "sacred spaces" for meditation. These days, hiking, biking and horseback riding are also essential components of the spa experience.

### Miraval

THE CITY OF TUCSON is ringed by mountains, and Miraval is perched in the foothills of the Santa Catalina range at around 3,000 feet. Located a 50-minute shuttle ride from the airport, the resort is surrounded by a vast, stirring expanse of sand and saguaro. Hundreds of acres of desert gardens and cascading waterfalls are accented by striking sculpted-metal windmills, and bird ramadas are frequented by swooping red cardinals and strutting Gambel's quail. In the meticulously tended grounds, it is never hard to find a tranquil corner, whether a tree-strung hammock, a shaded bench or a circular stone *kiva*. Everywhere, there is a profound sense of privacy and delicious seclusion.

The mantra at Miraval is "life in balance," and the impressively varied daily menu of activities attests to

this idea. The resort has its own stables (usually offering two levels of rides each day), and guides escort regular hiking and mountain biking excursions. Paths crisscross the property, leading to tennis courts, yoga and Pilates studios, and a state-of-the-art fitness center with a gorgeous 75-foot tile-edged lap pool. In addition, if you feel inclined, there are seminars on photography and nutrition, while golf is available 20 minutes away at the Golf Club at Vistoso, an 18-hole Tom Weiskopf course laid out beneath the vast desert sky. During our stay, we were consistently impressed by an outstanding staff whose members were always attentive and anxious to assist with special requests whenever possible.

No matter what activities they prefer, most visitors spend ample time at Miraval's award-winning spa. A high-ceilinged reception area invokes an instant sense of calm. Separate men's and women's lounges have each been provided with steam rooms, saunas and private whirlpools. There are two floors of massage and hydrotherapy suites and a full-service salon. Generally, guests wait for therapists to meet them in a spacious "quiet room" that overlooks a tri-level swimming pool. This sanctuary has floor-to-ceiling windows and chaise longues draped with downy blankets. In addition, a new outdoor treatment garden features spa tents with flagstone floors and saguaro-spine partitions; special treatments here include massages and exfoliating scrubs that employ mineral-rich mesquite seeds and clay.

The resort's 102 casita-style lodgings have been recently revamped and are laid out in five small "villages," each with its own courtyard. The most secluded and private accommodations are in Cholla village. Our 600-square-foot "Catalina Room" came with a front sitting room, while an outdoor patio provided memorable views of the mountains. All rooms are decorated in a muted desert palette and are appointed with mahogany writing desks, clay-tiled floors and subtly striped carpeting that recalls the area's straw-like grass. Technological amenities include 42-inch plasma televisions, DVD players and wireless Internet. Baths have plush velour Frette bathrobes and customized Miraval Cactus Cream bath products, while sleek Kohler fixtures give a contemporary edge to the subtle desert motif.

Every evening, delicious hors d'oeuvres are set out by the fireplace in the *Brave Bill Lounge*, which offers cocktails and an extensive wine list. Meals are served at the *Cactus Flower Restaurant*, where you will find high

ceilings and a flood of natural light. Outside, on a thatched terrace, the Santa Catalinas rear up majestically, seemingly close enough to touch. Many dishes have been designed in consultation with famed nutrition and wellness expert Dr. Andrew Weil (bestselling-author and director of the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona). Everything is flavorful and attractively presented, from the beef tenderloin with wild mushroom crust and roasted root vegetables to the rack of lamb with cinnamon peppercorn sauce and black quinoa. We especially loved the delicately seared ahi tuna, served with Israeli couscous and sautéed Swiss chard.

Overall, we thoroughly enjoyed our stay, and the few drawbacks were relatively minor. The rooms are not completely soundproofed, so you might overhear a neighbor's television. And some of the scheduled activities (horseback riding, photography classes and group hikes in particular) quickly become fully subscribed, so be sure to sign up upon arrival or you may find yourself missing out. On the plus side, you can book almost anything as a private consultation for an additional fee. Premium Deluxe Double, \$1,290; Catalina Double, \$1,310; Executive King Suite for two, \$1,790, all meals and scheduled activities included, as well as one spa service, or one round of golf, per person per night. Tel. (800) 232-3969 or (520) 825-4000. Email: [reservations@miravalresort.com](mailto:reservations@miravalresort.com).

## El Monte Sagrado

OVER A MILE ABOVE SEA LEVEL, with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the mesas of northern New Mexico as a stunning backdrop, Taos is renowned for the magical light that dances across the face of its wonderful adobe architecture. No wonder the town is beloved by artists and writers, with the result that more than 100 galleries, workshops and studios grace the Plaza and the surrounding streets. Inside the spectacular Taos Pueblo (a Native American adobe village built between the 11th and 15th Centuries and today both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Historic Landmark), artisans exhibit a striking and colorful array of signature pottery and indigenous crafts.

The El Monte Sagrado resort and spa is located just a few blocks from the Plaza and draws inspiration from this rich regional culture. Despite the fact that its adobe-style structures employ recycled materials, the feel of its 84 rooms and suites is decidedly opulent. Ten so-called "Global Suites," extravagantly themed one- and two-bedroom casitas, have been decorated with furniture and murals commissioned from artisans around the world by

interior designer Ady Arttime. All offer enclosed private outdoor patios with hot tubs, and some provide dramatic views of the mountains. However, we preferred the two "Premier Suites" ("Bali" and "Tibet"), owing to their more open room plans. "Bali" is furnished with stained pine floors and elaborately carved handpainted furniture, while its stone-tiled bath has a skylight and roomy glass-walled shower with a rainforest showerhead. There are also Pueblo-themed Native American Junior Suites. These are nicely detailed with punched-copper doors, wrought-iron lamps, woven prints and gas fireplaces,

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A tranquil green space called the "Sacred Circle" is shaded by towering cottonwood trees and edged by burbling streams

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but their cramped bedrooms barely accommodate the king-size beds and connect straight through baths to small living rooms.

At the center of El Monte Sagrado a tranquil green space called the "Sacred Circle" is shaded by towering cottonwood trees and edged by ponds and burbling streams. There, you might choose to join one of the regular yoga sessions on the grass. Aside from yoga, the spa offers a treatment menu heavy with multicultural influences. The Sumatra body polish uses sandalwood and coconut, while the High Desert treatment relies on native Taosño plants and oils. Adjacent to the spa, the Aqua Center has a large heated swimming pool with separate plunge pool, wading pool and hot tub.

The property's *De la Tierra* restaurant is a dramatic, Oriental-accented space with black silk chairs, gold-plated tiles and a floor-to-ceiling saltwater aquarium. Executive Chef Ruben Tanuz specializes in inventive fusion cuisine and does a terrific job with fresh, mainly organic ingredients. His signature dishes include mango and red curry soup with tempura shrimp, and seared elk chop with bean and *chicharrone* burrito served with caribe sauce. Staff members in the restaurant (and indeed, throughout the resort) proved friendly and anxious to help, but they are not always up to speed on details like meal availability and prices. This is doubtless a minor caveat at what is otherwise an unusual and pleasing property. Native American Junior Suite for one or two, \$350; Premier Suite, \$470; Global Suite, \$670. Tel. (800) 828-8267 or (575) 758-3502. Email: [info@elmontesagrado.com](mailto:info@elmontesagrado.com).

## Things You Should Know

 **THE CONNAUGHT** in London has reopened after a comprehensive restoration. Unlike showier properties such as Claridge's and The Savoy, the hotel has long been regarded as the embodiment of traditional British reserve and understatement. We are assured that the refurbished rooms in the original building, overlooking Mayfair's lovely Carlos Place, remain true to this spirit. However, devotees will have to wait until fall 2008 to stay in the hotel's much-anticipated new wing, which will house 31 rooms and suites, plus a lavish spa. Tel. (44) 20-7499-7070. [www.the-connaught.co.uk](http://www.the-connaught.co.uk)

 **DUNMORE BEACH CLUB** on Harbour Island in the Bahamas is currently up for sale. This doubtless explains some of the anguished letters of complaint we have recently received from members. Standards of maintenance appear to have seriously slipped since our last anonymous visit in winter 2005. We intend to monitor the situation and to report any developments.

 **HOTEL ROSAALPINA**, located at the center of San Cassiano in the spectacular Italian Dolomites, has been awarded a second Michelin star for its outstanding *St. Hubertus* restaurant. (One regional specialty is fillet of beef wrapped in hay!) An utterly charming family-run property, it is an idyllic hideaway for either

winter skiing or summer hiking. Daniela Steiner, wife of owner Paolo Pizzinini, opened its small spa in 1989 and now runs a company that provides spa services for, among other places, the Ritz in Paris. Tel. (39) 471-849500. [www.rosalpina.it](http://www.rosalpina.it)

 **GLENEAGLES**, the renowned Scottish golf resort, has opened a striking new restaurant. *Deseo* features separate food stations where diners choose from local and seasonal ingredients (Angus beef, Orkney lamb, west coast prawns), which are then cooked to order. In addition, Mediterranean tapas are served throughout the day. Gleneagles already enjoys a stellar reputation for its cuisine, thanks to Andrew Fairlie's renowned two-star restaurant. The days when Scottish cooking consisted chiefly of haggis and kippers are but a distant memory! Tel. (44) 1764-662231. [www.gleneagles.com](http://www.gleneagles.com)

 **HORIZONS AND COTTAGES**, the charming manor-hotel in Bermuda, is closed for redevelopment. Brickman, the New York real estate private equity firm, has entered into partnership with Horizons Ltd. Their plan envisions an "upgrade to five-star standards and style," plus the construction of a new 150-room hotel on the beach at the nearby Coral Beach Club. The associated property in Hamilton, Waterloo House, has closed permanently.

## Check This Out

**IN ADDITION TO THE SHOELESS** trudge through security and airlines that can't be bothered to put checked bags onto connecting flights, we have recently acquired a new travel *bête noire*: the late check-in. Even though it was rarely stated as official policy, a decade ago check-in and checkout times at most hotels were noon, which meant you were purchasing a 24-hour stay. Of late, however, check-in has been pushed back to 3 p.m. at a variety of high-end properties ranging, in our recent experience, from the Four Seasons Provence to the new Haymarket Hotel in London. Speaking anonymously, a senior hotel executive explained that the reason for this change is (surprise) the bottom line, since a later check-in time means that hotels can hire smaller housekeeping staffs. Bottom line or not, this new policy is a huge inconvenience. Foreshortened stays also have a malign impact on the experience at a given hotel, since by the time you've registered and your bags have finally been retrieved from the basement, you have only two or three hours before dinner in which to use the hotel's spa, or just to sit on your balcony and relax.

Making matters worse is a corollary trend toward earlier checkout times. Many European city hotels seek to chivy their guests into a waiting taxi by 11 a.m., though none has yet followed the example of the Hotel Monasterio in Cusco, Peru, where the official checkout is at an astonishing 9 a.m., allegedly because many arriving guests have just endured a red-eye flight from the States. Yes, yes, but what about the people who have already been in the country for a week? By our reckoning, fair play dictates that if you occupy a room from 3 p.m. to 11 a.m., or 20 hours instead of the traditional 24, the hotel should reduce its rates by one-sixth to compensate for the time that has been shaved from your stay. Impeccably logical, but somehow we doubt the idea will catch on.

The selection of hotels and resorts for inclusion in this newsletter is made on a completely independent basis, with Andrew Harper traveling incognito and paying full rate for all lodgings and related travel expenses.

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