

Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report[®]

OCTOBER 2015 | OUR 37TH YEAR

AndrewHarper.com

TRAVELING THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF TRULY ENCHANTING PLACES

THIS MONTH

TRAVELS THROUGH ALLURING CAMBODIA

A river journey, plus an idyllic private island and a return visit to Angkor Wat

BATH LUXURY DEBUT

Taking the waters in the west of England at a new hotel's unique thermal spa

WEB EXCLUSIVES

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☐ = additional related article

📷 = slideshow 📺 = video

IN THE NEWS

London Classic Reinvented

AFTER A 17-MONTH closure for a comprehensive upgrade, **The Lanesborough** reopened on Hyde Park Corner in July. Now part of the Oetker Collection, which includes Le Bristol in Paris, the property has been reinvented by the Alberto Pinto interior design studio. The 93 rooms are now decorated in full Regency splendor, with ornamental plasterwork, gold leaf and handpainted trompe l'oeil. The main restaurant, *Céleste*, is resplendently Venetian in style, with chandeliers, bas-reliefs and fluted columns. Chef Patron Eric Frechon, who presides over three-star *Epicure* at Le Bristol, has installed his protégé, Florian Favario, as head chef. Enhancements also include the Spa Studio, featuring treatments by La Prairie.

STYLISH CABINS, FINE CAMBODIAN CUISINE, MEMORABLE SHORE EXCURSIONS

A Cruise Aboard the *Aqua Mekong*



Plunge pool at the bow of the *Aqua Mekong*

© AQUA EXPEDITIONS

ON PREVIOUS VISITS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA, I OFTEN FOUND MYSELF YEARNING FOR A luxury riverboat on the Mekong, the fascinating 2,700-mile artery that links Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. My wish came true last December with the much-anticipated debut of the *Aqua Mekong*.

In 2008, the first Aqua boat, the *Aqua Amazon*, was the realization of a dream for businessman Francesco Galli Zugaro. Born in Switzerland to an Italian father and an American mother, Zugaro lived in Europe before moving to South America 18 years ago. He aspired to take travelers to otherwise inaccessible reaches of the Peruvian Amazon in unprecedented comfort and style. With the successful launch in 2011 of a second ship, the *Aria Amazon*, Zugaro turned to the challenge of Asia.

The *Aqua Mekong* follows itineraries of varying durations. When water levels are high — usually July through November — you can take a seven-night

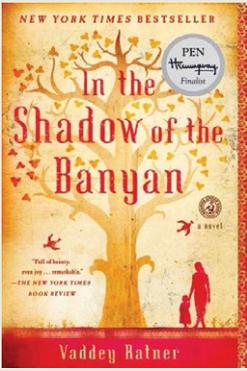
“Expedition Cruise” (in either direction) between My Tho in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta to Siem Reap in Cambodia, home of Angkor Wat. Alternatively, you can opt for a four-night “Explorer Cruise” or a three-night “Discovery Cruise.” When the water is low (chiefly December to June), choices are limited to trips between My Tho and Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

Having long wished to visit Tonle Sap, the largest body of fresh water in Southeast Asia, with floating villages and the famous Prek Toal bird sanctuary, I opted for a three-night upriver voyage from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. Alas, shortly before departure,

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TRAVEL TIPS



Books and Videos

TO FULLY appreciate the warmth of the Cambodian people, it is valuable to recall the agonies that the country suffered from 1975 to 1979 under the depraved rule of Pol Pot. Even if you saw Roland Joffé's 1984 film "The Killing Fields," it is well worth watching again. Based on an account of the 1975 fall of Phnom Penh by journalist Sydney Schanberg, it recounts his inability to prevent his photographer, Dith Pran, from being shipped off to labor in the countryside. Schanberg's book, "The Death and Life of Dith Pran" is equally riveting. For a fictional account of this era, I recommend "In the Shadow of the Banyan" by Vaddey Ratner, the tale of a young girl who loses her family but manages to survive the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. And although it is a bit offbeat, I highly recommend a recent documentary called "Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll," in which the history of the country's pop culture is interwoven with the rise of the Khmer Rouge that resulted in its destruction. This film is not available on DVD, but can be streamed.

Aqua emailed to inform us that seasonal water levels had not risen sufficiently to allow the ship — which draws 5 feet — to navigate the lake. However, we were assured that a full program of excursions would be more than adequate compensation.

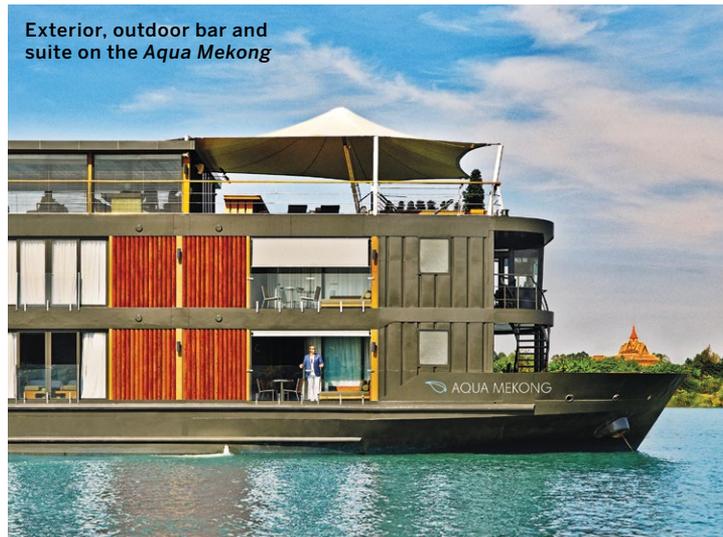
Arriving in Phnom Penh for boarding, I had little trouble spotting the *Aqua Mekong* out on the river. Given its wood siding and huge cabin windows, its relationship to the *Aqua Amazon* was unmistakable. (I published a review of my Peruvian journey in the November 2010 *Hideaway Report*.) However, the new vessel is bigger than its sister ships. The 130-foot *Amazon* accommodates 24 passengers in 12 suites, whereas the 205-foot *Mekong* carries 40 passengers in 20 suites (attended by 40 crew). As with its siblings, it comprises three decks, the first two devoted primarily to guest cabins, with the rear of the second taken up by a lovely dining room. On the top deck, the *Mekong* has a spacious bar/lounge with seating areas along floor-to-ceiling windows, a media room with a large screen and comfortable Eames chairs, and a small library. At the stern, a gym provides a selection of aerobic machines, while in the bow, a shaded plunge pool offers an idyllic place to relax or to sip a glass of wine.

At 322 square feet, the cabins are larger than those on the first two boats. We booked one of the eight suites with an outside balcony furnished with a small table, two chairs and a luxurious

daybed. Handsomely appointed with grass-cloth wallcoverings and wood accents, the cabin came with ample closet space, well-considered lighting, polished wood floors and raw-silk throws. The bath was equipped with twin sinks and a walk-in shower with a rainfall head. Four sets of two interconnecting suites are suitable for families. Passengers also have the option of booking adjoining suites, with one configured as a private living room.

Prior to the trip, I had noted with anticipation that the cuisine aboard the *Mekong* is under the supervision of Michelin-starred chef David Thompson, whose restaurant *nahm* in Bangkok is justly regarded as one of the finest in Asia. (His seminal work, "Thai Food," sits well-thumbed on a Harper bookshelf.) Under his guidance, the kitchen turned out a series of superb meals with dishes such as Cambodian rice noodles with chicken and wild ginger sauce, a green curry of catfish with a lemon-basil-cashew nut pudding and coconut cream, and prawns braised with white wine and herbs accompanied by pea and prosciutto risotto. During our entire voyage, the waitstaff could not have been more pleasant or engaging. Indeed, throughout the ship, we found the crew to be exceptionally courteous and helpful; whoever provides their training deserves enormous credit.

Our fellow passengers formed an eclectic group of six nationalities, with ages ranging from preteen



Exterior, outdoor bar and suite on the *Aqua Mekong*



Lunch of crab, pomelo and ginger; stir-fried prawns with garlic chives, and steamed grouper with yellow beans at dinner

FOOD PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER

BOOK: SIMON & SCHUSTER

BEDROOM: © AQUA EXPEDITIONS / RICHARD MARK DOBSON EXTERIOR: © SPH MAGAZINES / COURTESY OF AQUA EXPEDITIONS

to late 60s. Everyone seemed enthused by the trip, and willing to be adventurous. The *Mekong* has four auxiliary aluminum launches with capacity for 10 passengers, crewed by English-speaking guides. These head off two or three times a day and are in radio communication with the main vessel. Ten bicycles are also available for either guided or independent shore excursions.

On our first morning, we embarked on a short hike to the village of Koh Chen, known for its silversmiths. There, on a visit to a workshop, we saw firsthand the painstaking craft of hammering the metal onto wooden templates and the magical application of a silver plate to copper pieces. Later, we stopped at a small Buddhist temple with graceful lines, bright saffron-orange wooden supports and impressive gilding. Several of the young monks had gathered under a tree for lunch. Although shy, they were nonetheless extremely welcoming. Nearby, we spotted two intricately carved and painted dragon boats, entered by the local people in races held every November at the end of the annual monsoon.

Another morning began with a trip through the picturesque floating village of Kampong Chhnang on the Tonle Sap River. Ashore, we mounted bicycles and set off to the village of Andong Russei to meet a well-known potter who crafts cooking vessels of simple beauty and durability. On a second stop, we conversed with a farmer famous for his palm sugar and potent palm wine. Other activities during our eventful three days included oxcart rides, kayaking and an impromptu soccer match with local children in a fallow rice paddy.

Of course, much of the pleasure of a Mekong cruise comes from lounging on deck as Southeast Asia slides gracefully past, observing the painted storks and pied kingfishers, the rice barges and the huge drifting rafts of purple water hyacinth. The life of the great river is an endlessly diverting spectacle of which it is almost impossible to tire. Our days of languor and indulgence were further enhanced by trips to the boat's small spa for a Khmer massage or Vietnamese aromatherapy.

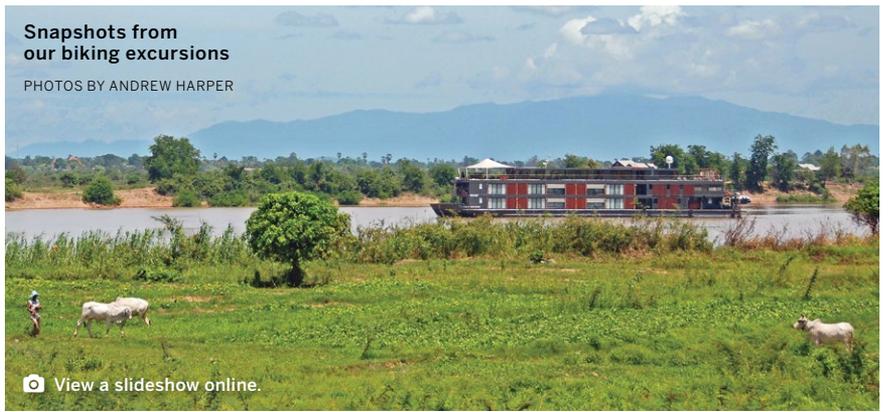
At the end of our voyage, one of our fellow passengers, an experienced traveler, ventured the opinion that this was one of the most enjoyable trips he and his wife had ever taken. I replied that I entirely agreed with him. 

AQUA MEKONG

3-night Discovery Cruise, Second Deck Design Suite, \$3,465; 4-night Explorer Cruise, \$4,620; 7-night Expedition Cruise, \$8,085. Rates include all meals, house wines and shore excursions. Aqua Expeditions, Tel. (866) 603-3687. aquaexpeditions.com 

Snapshots from our biking excursions

PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



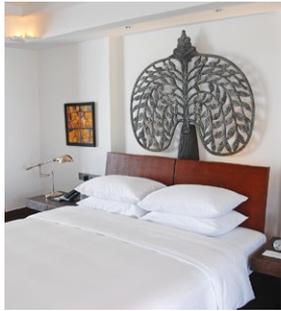
 [View a slideshow online.](#)

“ The *Mekong* has four auxiliary aluminum launches with capacity for 10 passengers, crewed by English-speaking guides. Ten bicycles are also available for either guided or independent shore excursions.



Revisiting Siem Reap

GIVEN THE ALLURE OF ANGKOR WAT, IT IS NOT SURPRISING that Siem Reap has become a destination for travelers from all over the world. Nonetheless, I was amazed by the development that has occurred since our last visit in 2008.



Second-floor pool, and bedroom, sitting area and garden terrace of our suite at the Park Hyatt

PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER

Fortunately, Siem Reap retains a degree of charm, and the nearby temples are still astonishing. Angkor Wat itself is one of those extraordinary places, like Machu Picchu or the Taj Mahal, that simply has to be seen, despite its 2 million annual visitors. (As at Machu Picchu, Angkor Wat ideally would be closed to the public for a while to facilitate restoration and to allow a management plan to be implemented. But as it is the centerpiece of Cambodia's vital tourist industry, this is most unlikely.)

I already recommend two hotels in Siem Reap. Over recent years, **Amansara** has become an established favorite of *Hideaway Report* subscribers. Set within a tranquil enclave in the grounds of a guesthouse that once belonged to King Norodom Sihanouk, its two dozen accommodations surround a grassy central courtyard. Each features a generous sitting area, furnished patio and oversize bath. Public areas include a dining pavilion that serves both traditional Khmer and Western dishes, a library and a 55-foot outdoor swimming pool, plus an 82-foot lap pool and a full-service spa. This is a true hideaway and no other hotel in Siem Reap offers an equivalent refuge from the tourist hordes.

The contrasting **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor** is distinguished by its historical atmosphere of French colonial Indochine. The 119 rooms are stylishly decorated with Cambodian artifacts, and many baths retain their period claw-foot tubs. The *Restaurant Le Grand* serves superb Royal Khmer cuisine, while the 115-foot swimming pool surrounded by serene manicured gardens is one of my favorite hotel pools in the world.

On my recent trip, however, I opted to try the new **Park Hyatt** (the brand's first hotel in Southeast Asia). Opened in 2013, the 104-room



Northern gate of Angkor Thom

© CNORA / ISTOCK

property occupies what was formerly the Hotel de la Paix. During a 14-month refurbishment, noted designer Bill Bensley added Khmer touches to the existing art deco motif. Our spacious suite encompassed an expansive living room with polished wood floors and swathes of Cambodian silk, a small butler's kitchen and a garden terrace. The generous bath was equipped with a terrazzo tub and both walk-in and outdoor showers. Contemporary Cambodian art gave the suite a strong sense of place.

During the heat of the day, we spent much of our time at a pool on the second level, crossed by a stone bridge and punctuated by square islands filled with trees and plants, giving it the feel of a small lake. Next to the pool, a three-story spa provides a full menu of therapies in six tranquil treatment rooms, using locally harvested floral and aromatic ingredients. Overlooking a courtyard centered on a 100-year-old banyan tree, *The Dining Room* serves a combination of local and French Provençal cuisines.

Given the hotel's situation close to the Old French Quarter, we ventured out to visit shops recommended by the proficient concierge. This outing also gave us a chance to stroll along the picturesque Siem Reap River. The old town was formed by an aggregation of small villages that were originally developed around Buddhist pagodas. These are evenly spaced along the river, from Wat Preah An Kau Sai in the north to Phnom Krom in the south. The most animated quarter is concentrated around Sivutha Boulevard and the Phsar Chas, "Old Market," with its French colonial buildings. The Phsar Leu area is crowded with shops selling gemstones and woodcarvings.

All in all, we thoroughly enjoyed our stay at the Park Hyatt. It is complementary to my other two recommended properties, being an elegant full-service hotel with gracious staff in an ideal central location. The street outside may be bustling, but the atmosphere within is serene. **HR**

Park Hyatt Siem Reap 93

LIKE The convenient central location; the stylish design; the delightful and well-trained staff. **DISLIKE** Very little; for a new hotel, it is unusually polished. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel has a BMW that can be booked in advance for airport transfers and in-town excursions. PARK DELUXE VIEW KING, \$410; PARK SUITE KING, \$525; PARK EXECUTIVE SUITE (WITH PRIVATE PLUNGE POOL), \$1,055. SIVUTHA BOULEVARD, SIEM REAP. TEL. (855) 6321-1234. SIEMREAP.PARK.HYATT.COM 

 For more information on the Park Hyatt and our two other recommended hotels in Siem Reap, **Amansara** (95) and **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor** (93), visit AndrewHarper.com.

The Magic of Song Saa

AS I RESEARCHED MY VISIT TO SONG SAA, I FOUND MYSELF DREAMING OF Thailand 30 years ago. In 1985, islands such as Phuket and Koh Samui were almost untouched. The first Amanresort, Amanpuri, opened on Phuket in 1988. Maybe Cambodia today will be like Thailand was back then, I thought.

Island Pastimes

ACTIVITIES at Song Saa include kayaking in the surrounding archipelago, rain forest tours guided by a member of the resort's Conservation Team, and snorkeling trips through nearby coral gardens led by a marine biologist. My most memorable experience, however, was a Khmer cooking class. The beef lok lak was one of the best Southeast Asian dishes I've ever tasted. □

A 35-minute speedboat ride from Sihanoukville on the country's west coast — a city three-and-a-half hours by road or 40 minutes by air from Phnom Penh — Song Saa lies in the pristine Koh Rong Archipelago. The resort's name means "The Sweethearts" in Khmer, a reference to the paired islets, Koh Ouen and Koh Bong, that comprise the property. The exquisite beauty of the natural setting inspired an Australian couple who were sailing through the islands in 2006 to construct the hotel. Rory and Melita Hunter were ideally suited to the task: he with a background in property development; she in interior design. Their brainchild, with its 27 villas, opened in early 2012.

Aboard the launch, my first glimpse of the island filled me with hope. It looked idyllic. Greeting

us, manager Bradlie Goian, dressed in long shorts and white shirt, set the prevailing tone of casual elegance. A polite member of staff escorted us along a sand pathway through the verdant landscaping to our 2,475-square-foot Ocean View Villa. Its main room displayed a skillful combination of materials and fabrics, with one stone accent wall, wood floors and a soaring thatched ceiling. Imaginative local art helped to create an air of authenticity. My favorite example was a framed assembly of faded planks salvaged from area fishing boats. A few steps beyond the large four-poster bed, a sunken seating area opened onto a wooden deck and a private infinity pool. The bath featured a bathing area with walk-in shower, soaking tub and a door leading to an outdoor shower.

There are two other villa categories at Song Saa: 11 Jungle Villas nestled on the central hill afford views of the surrounding islands and waters, while eight Overwater Villas enable guests to step directly into the ocean from private balconies. Two two-bedroom Overwater Villas (3,240 square feet) come with indoor dining areas with seating for 12, and private chefs.

Although in-villa dining is an attractive option, we loved going to the resort's two restaurants. At Vista, set just off the shoreline, we enjoyed dishes such as spring rolls with local crab and fresh vegetables, and marinated chicken breast with a mint-cream sauce and couscous. The culinary highlight of our stay, however, was a Khmer feast, which included superb beef lok lak, stir-fried chicken with ginger and spring onion, and prawns with Kampot pepper. At lunch, we invariably found our way to the casual *Driftwood Bar*, which offers a tapas-style menu as well as pizzas (our favorite of which was topped with duck and hoisin sauce).

Spa cuisine is also available at Song Saa in conjunction with the resort's extensive wellness programs. Although there is no centralized spa facility, outdoor salas and treatment villas are scattered through the rain forest and along the ocean shore. Individual treatment schedules, constructed after consultation with the "Head of Wellness," combine traditional Khmer techniques with Ayurvedic principles. Yoga and meditation are also available.

I loved everything I saw and experienced at Song Saa. In many ways, its serenity and aesthetic refinement reminded me of an Aman resort. The atmosphere is blissfully relaxing and otherworldly. This is a truly exceptional hideaway. **HR**

Pool of a Two-bedroom Overwater Villa, and bedroom of an Overwater Villa with glass floor in lounge area, at Song Saa



Song Saa

LIKE The feeling of being utterly removed from the world and sequestered on an idyllic desert island. **DISLIKE** The long drive from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville — for which we engaged a chauffeur — is not for nervous passengers. **GOOD TO KNOW** For those who don't want to drive, a helicopter transfer can be arranged. Since April 2015, domestic flights have been available from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville airport, from where it is a 20-minute drive to the port. **JUNGLE VILLA**, \$1,560; **OCEAN VIEW VILLA**, \$2,175; **OVERWATER VILLA**, \$2,690. **RATES INCLUDE ALL MEALS, HOUSE WINES AND SPIRITS, SPEEDBOAT TRANSFERS, LAUNDRY, YOGA CLASSES, USE OF WATER SPORTS EQUIPMENT AND GUIDED MARINE AND TERRESTRIAL TOURS. KOH OUEN, KOH RONG ARCHIPELAGO. TEL. (855) 23-886-750. SONGSAA.COM** 

Debut of The Gainsborough Bath Spa



The Royal Crescent

Contrasting Bath Hotels

I HAVE LONG recommended two other hotels in Bath; they are completely different from The Gainsborough — and from one another.

The Royal Crescent is situated in a part of the city distinguished by the sublime neoclassical architecture of John Wood the Younger. The hotel is located at the center of the eponymous Crescent — in townhouses No. 15 and No. 16 — and overlooks the green expanse of Royal Victoria Park. The 45 guest rooms were recently refurbished and incorporate antique furnishings; some offer fireplaces. At the rear of the hotel, overlooking an idyllic flower garden, *The Dower House Restaurant* serves chef David Campbell's modern British cuisine. A spa comprises a 40-foot heated pool, a hammam and six treatment rooms.

Less than a mile away in a residential neighborhood, **The Bath Priory** occupies an 1835 manor set amid three acres of lovely gardens. The 33 accommodations include several spacious Junior Suites, while four full suites occupy a separate building. A Michelin one-star restaurant — where chef Sam Moody specializes in slow-cooked food — offers a menu of modern European cuisine. The spa has both indoor and outdoor heated swimming pools, plus four beauty treatment rooms.

I SELDOM NEED AN EXCUSE TO RETURN TO BATH, THE LOVELY CITY OF HONEY-COLORED limestone that lies 115 miles directly west of London. But the opening of The Gainsborough Bath Spa on July 1 made a visit almost mandatory. (The hotel is named in honor of Thomas Gainsborough, the leading English portrait painter who lived in Bath for 16 years from 1759.)

I had been awaiting the property's debut with growing impatience. For months, its website had promised that reservations would soon be accepted, but the launch date always seemed to recede. The construction of a new 99-room hotel in the middle of a UNESCO World Heritage site 175 yards from the city's famous Roman Baths was clearly a project that could have unforeseen complications.

The original problem, the friendly receptionist explained on the morning of my arrival, had been the discovery of the Beau Street Hoard, a treasure trove of around 17,500 Roman coins dating between 32 B.C. and A.D. 274 that had been unearthed during the excavation of a pool for the hotel's new spa.

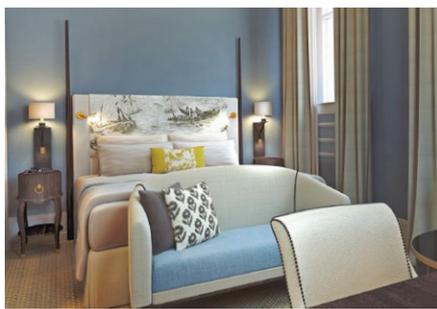
The Romans came to the west of England to mine for lead, but discovering a thermal spring that was already a sacred site for the local Celtic people and presumably nostalgic for the comforts of home, they built an elaborate bathing complex with a large indoor pool, as well as an imposing temple. When the Romans left, the baths fell into disrepair and it was not until the spa craze of the 18th century, when Bath became a fashionable resort town, that they were finally restored.

The Gainsborough has been created by the amalgamation of two existing buildings — one Georgian, one Victorian — that have served, among numerous incarnations, as a college and a

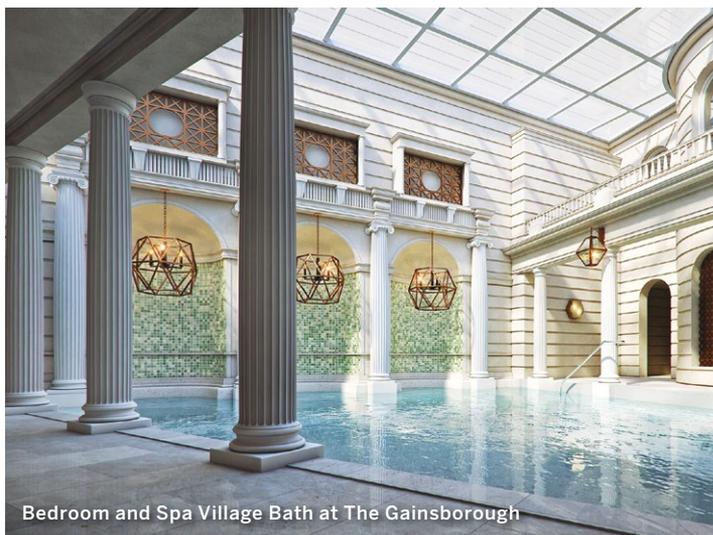
hospital. (The \$54 million project was the work of YTL, a Malaysian industrial conglomerate that, in 2002, acquired Wessex Water, Bath's water supply company.) On a quiet side street a two-minute walk from Bath Abbey and The Grand Pump Room, as well as The Roman Baths, the hotel's location is close to perfect. From the outside, it is an imposing structure of golden stone adorned by massive Ionic columns. Inside, however, it is still possible to discern traces of its former lives. The lobby is smaller than ideal, and the long corridor that links it to the restaurant retains a vaguely institutional feel.

We had booked a Classic Room, but it proved to be on the small side, so we moved to a Junior Suite. The interior of The Gainsborough is the work of New York-based Champalimaud Design, and the color scheme of blue-gray, cream and gold was both stylish and restful. The bedroom was well-appointed with a small sofa and a sizeable desk. A dressing area with sufficient hanging space led into a relatively small bath, which came with a single sink set in black marble, and a shower over the tub. Perhaps the suite's best features were the tall windows that afforded panoramic views over the city to the surrounding green hills.

Public areas at The Gainsborough include *The Canvas Room*, a peaceful lounge for casual all-day dining and afternoon tea; a diminutive cocktail



“ The Spa Village Bath is now located beneath an impressive four-story glass atrium at the heart of the hotel.



Bedroom and Spa Village Bath at The Gainsborough

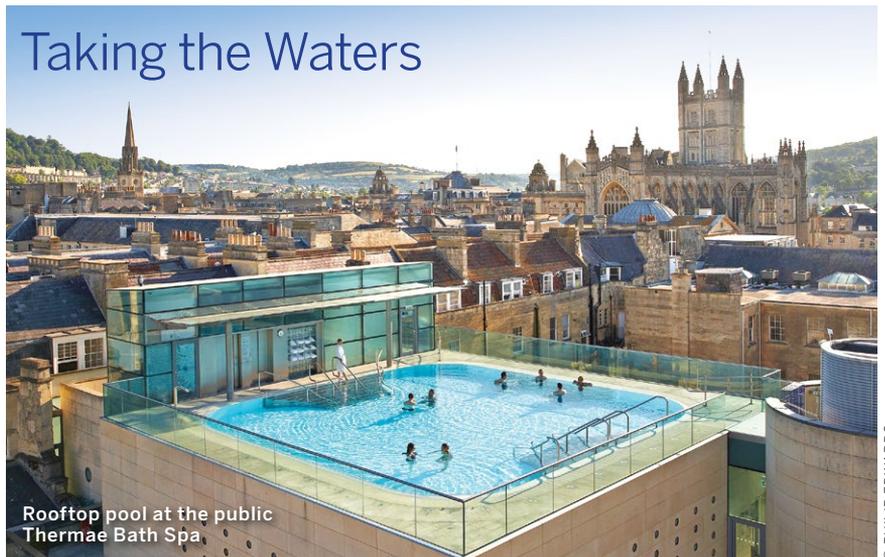
bar, its walls hung with contemporary art; and a bright and spacious restaurant, in which two dining areas are separated by a refrigerated wine wall. The restaurant is under the supervision of Johann Lafer, an Austrian Michelin-starred celebrity chef. Lafer's self-proclaimed philosophy is "Dining Without Borders," which means, in practice, local ingredients with Asian spices and inflections, hence "Roasted Wiltshire lamb rack, with Szechuan pepper crust, Thai asparagus, celery and blood orange." Our meal was well-prepared — my Cornish crab salad was delicious — but I couldn't help wonder why a restaurant in a quintessentially English city should choose to source its asparagus in Thailand. The world is increasingly homogenized, yet hotel companies often fail to appreciate that much of the appeal of travel comes from experiences specific to a particular place.

If The Gainsborough had no more to offer, I would have departed content but slightly underwhelmed. Fortunately, the hotel yet had an ace to play. In 2006, the public **Thermae Bath Spa** (see sidebar) opened directly across the street. To general consternation, it was discovered that the thermal water supply was threatened by serious deterioration of the pipework. At this point, The Gainsborough's owners, YTL, offered to pay for the drilling of a new borehole for the public baths, the return for their largesse being natural hot water piped directly into the private spa of their hotel.

The Spa Village Bath is now located beneath an impressive four-story glass atrium at the heart of The Gainsborough. There, hotel guests can take the waters amid surroundings of considerable splendor. Prior to spa treatments that focus on personalized aromatherapies, they are encouraged to take the "Bath House" circuit, spending around an hour soaking in thermal pools maintained at varying temperatures and emerging to rub their bodies with crushed lavender ice.

During an excavation in 1864, the remains of an unsuspected Roman spa complex complete with a well-preserved mosaic pavement were discovered where the Spa Village Bath now stands. To safeguard the original, the mosaic has been covered by a replica. Nonetheless, much of the pleasure that we derived from this remarkable facility came from the knowledge that more than 1,700 years ago, Bath's Roman inhabitants were relaxing in exactly the same spot. The Gainsborough is a notable new hotel, but the unique Spa Village Bath elevates it to another level entirely. **HR**

Taking the Waters



Rooftop pool at the public Thermae Bath Spa

© PHILIP EDWARDS

CONSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN BATHS began in A.D. 43 and extended over 300 years. They were situated at the center of an extensive leisure complex that included a

“A drinking fountain allows visitors to sample clean water from a borehole. The taste is strong and not unlike that of Vichy water.”

gymnasium and massage room, as well as areas devoted to gambling and wine drinking. Today, their most conspicuous feature is the Great Bath, a large rectangular pool filled with ominous-looking green water. Originally, the Great Bath had a roof and the water was clear; nowadays, being open to the sky, sunlight facilitates the growth of algae. Nobody swims in the Great Bath anymore, and the surrounding site is a museum (the highlight of which is a stunning gilt bronze mask of the goddess Minerva). Most of the surviving Roman structures are below what is now street level. These include the Sacred Spring; the foundations of the caldarium, tepidarium and frigidarium (the hot,

tepid and cold baths); and parts of the pediment of the Temple of Minerva, including a powerful Gorgon's head that once glowered down on worshipers from a height of 50 feet.

Bath has three thermal springs. The King's Spring rises within The Roman Baths; the other two, the Hetling Spring and the Cross Spring, emerge about 450 feet to the west. Museum visitors now walk on elevated pathways, below which the steaming natural waters continue to flow at a rate of 264,000 gallons a day and a steady temperature of about 115 degrees. The water contains 42 minerals and was long held to have a range of therapeutic qualities. A drinking fountain at the exit of the museum allows visitors to sample clean water from a borehole. The taste is strong and not unlike that of Vichy water. In the 18th century, visitors drank the waters in the adjoining Grand Pump Room, a social center that features in Jane Austen's novels "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion."

If you want to bathe in the thermal waters today, you can do so as a guest at The Gainsborough hotel or in the new **Thermae Bath Spa**, a public facility that opened in 2006. Designed by a leading British architect, Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, the striking building was constructed in golden Bath stone and enclosed by a glass envelope. The complex comprises two natural thermal baths — a spectacular open-air rooftop pool and an indoor pool — plus a large steam room and 20 spa treatment rooms, including the 18th-century Hot Bath. Children under 16 are not permitted, but they may bathe with adult supervision in the Cross Bath nearby, an open-air thermal bath under the same management housed within an exquisite Georgian structure built in 1789. **HR**

The Gainsborough Bath Spa 93

LIKE The superb, one-of-a-kind spa complex; the ideal central location, close to Bath Abbey, The Roman Baths and The Grand Pump Room. **DISLIKE** The austere corridors on the first floor; the lack of a walk-in shower in our Junior Suite. **GOOD TO KNOW** Bath Spa train station is a five-minute walk away. Trains to London Paddington take one hour, 40 minutes. CLASSIC ROOM, \$485; JUNIOR SUITE, \$670. BEAU STREET, BATH. TEL. (44) 1225-358-888. THEGAINSBOROUGHBATHTSPA.CO.UK

 For more information on The Gainsborough Bath Spa and our two other recommended hotels in Bath, **The Royal Crescent** (94) and **The Bath Priory** (94), as well as our recommendation 10 miles outside of Bath, **Lucknam Park** (96), visit AndrewHarper.com.



A sculptural arrangement of breakfast tropical fruit at Song Saa, Cambodia

PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

Escaping the Crowds

MORE THAN 25 years ago, I vowed to avoid major European cities in the high season. Venice remains incomparably beautiful, but I have come to appreciate the mysterious grays of spring and fall rather than the Canaletto blue of summer. This year, I had reason to be in Paris at the end of July, so, in the name of journalistic research, I decided to make a speedy round of the principal sights. The queue for Notre Dame was several hours long, while the boisterous crowd in front of the "Mona Lisa" stood 11 people deep. Of late, two factors have exacerbated the situation. One is the exponential increase in tourism to Europe from newly prosperous Asia, and the second is the favorable exchange rate between the euro and the dollar. Recently, I was contacted by an advisor in the Harper Travel Office, who expressed frustration at her inability to obtain last-minute reservations at my recommended hotels and restaurants. Her clients, she said, invariably wanted private guides and tours, but for places such as the Vatican, these were increasingly unavailable. You should tell people, she continued darkly, that if they want to take a trip to the Amalfi Coast next June, they'd better let us arrange it by September at the latest. I daresay that people have grumbled for centuries that places just aren't the way they used to be. But in Europe, the time really has come to travel out of season, if you can, and to make reservations at least nine months in advance.

Andrew Harper

From My Notebook

Aman in the Caribbean

Scheduled to debut at the end of this year, **Amanera** is a new Aman resort located on the northern shore of the Dominican Republic. Set on a 2,000-acre estate surrounded by rain forest, the resort has a cliff-top setting overlooking the mile-long Playa Grande beach. Its 25 Casitas all provide ocean views; the top-of-the-range two-bedroom Bay View Casa comes with a 65-foot private pool. Amanera is integrated with the legendary Playa Grande Golf Course, designed by the great Robert Trent Jones. The 7,085-yard course, which boasts the highest number of ocean holes in the Western Hemisphere (10), is currently being restored by his son, Rees Jones. If golf is not your thing, Amanera has a two-story spa, plus studios for yoga, Pilates and meditation. Marlin fishing and scuba diving are also available.

Post-Safari

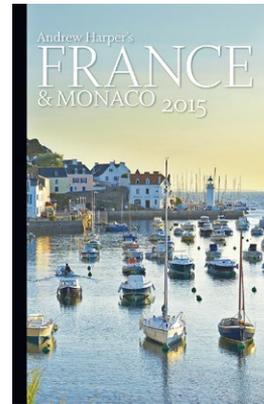
Africa's dirt roads are often bumpy, and game drives generally begin in the half-light before dawn. A relaxing spell on a tropical beach is the ideal way to conclude a safari. Now, there is a new option in Mozambique's blissful Bazaruto Archipelago. Well-respected company &Beyond has recently opened a new lodge on **Benguerra Island**. Twelve thatched casinhas and cabanas, plus the three-bedroom Casa Familia, all with private pools, overlook a spectacular beach and the tranquil waters of a marine conservation area. Activities include scuba diving, catch-and-release big game fishing and dhow cruises.



&Beyond Benguerra Island

Provence Classic Upgrade

Perched on a ridge at the heart of the Luberon, Gordes is one of the most spectacular villages in Provence, its ancient buildings seemingly clamped to the hillside in reckless defiance of gravity. **La Bastide de Gordes** is the quintessential Provençal hotel, surrounded by turreted 12th-century fortifications of golden stone. After a 12-month, \$35 million renovation, the hotel reopened in June. The 33 rooms and six suites (three of which have private balconies) have been redecorated in a Gallic country house style. One of the two restaurants is now under the supervision of Parisian three-star chef Pierre Gagnaire, while the other, *La Citadelle*, serves traditional Provençal and Mediterranean cuisine. The new 8,600-square-foot Sisley Spa offers a large indoor pool, plus an 82-foot lap pool set amid terraced gardens.



Collection Updates

OCTOBER BRINGS two more of my personal travel guides: **France & Monaco** and **Northern Europe & Russia**. Updates feature my latest discoveries, regional notebooks, touring maps, restaurants and, of course, a complete list of my recommended hotels with numerical ratings and detailed descriptions. *The Andrew Harper Collection* books are now available for individual purchase at AndrewHarper.com/store/harper-collection. They are also mailed bimonthly to Premier subscribers. To upgrade your subscription, contact clientrelations@andrewharper.com.

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