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

Istanbul: Boutique Hotels Beside the Bosphorus



FEW CITIES ARE MORE enthralling than Istanbul. An international crossroads for more than 2,000 years, it possesses a legacy of extraordinary buildings, which create a uniquely romantic urban skyline. And the glittering expanse of the Bosphorus is surely the world's most captivating waterway.

Today Istanbul is thriving. A teeming metropolis of nearly 13 million, it has been the principal beneficiary of Turkey's recent economic and political rise. As well as playing an increasingly important diplomatic role in a rapidly changing Middle East, Turkey is now a crucial terminus for oil and gas pipelines, linking producers in Russia and Central Asia with markets in the West. The result has been a dramatic increase in self-confidence and

prosperity. Long renowned for its lavish palace hotels, Istanbul now offers a growing number of smaller properties that provide charm, privacy and attentive personal service. The city also has a host of fine new restaurants — with Turkish cuisine being at the height of culinary fashion — plus a vibrant contemporary art scene.

In Istanbul, history is inescapable. The original city of Byzantium was founded in the seventh century B.C. by Greeks from Megara (near Athens). Destroyed by the Romans, it was rebuilt by the Emperor Constantine and renamed Constantinople in A.D. 330, becoming the joint capital of the Roman Empire. The city's golden age was in the sixth century during the reign of the Emperor Justinian, who built the great Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom"), completed in 537 and for nearly 1,000 years the largest cathedral in the world. Sacked by the Venetians in 1204 on their way to the Fourth Crusade, Constantinople began to decline, an atrophy that resulted in its capture by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Istanbul survived as a strikingly cosmopolitan city until the 1920s, when rising nationalism led to the departure of many non-Turkish residents.

We have always thought it a shame to arrive in Istanbul by air. No approach to a city is more dramatic and stirringly beautiful than the one a ship's passengers

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enjoy as they glide from the Sea of Marmara toward the incomparable Golden Horn. Those who wish to have this unforgettable experience can do so aboard two of the world's newest and most impressive cruise ships. Both the *Seabourn Odyssey* (launched in June 2009) and Silversea's *Silver Spirit* (launched in December 2009) offer a number of seven- and 14-day cruises to and from Istanbul in spring and fall 2011. For further information, contact the Andrew Harper Travel Office, (800) 375-4685.

Although wonderfully picturesque, Istanbul is not always an easy city. It is vast and cacophonous. This is not a place generally conducive to a quiet evening stroll, and for shopping and sightseeing, you will likely feel most comfortable with a driver and a private guide. And, alas, security considerations cannot be entirely ignored. In July 2008, there was a terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate, and although no Americans were hurt, three Turkish police officers were killed. At the time of this writing, the State Department had posted no warnings or advisories for Turkey, and merely urges Americans "to exercise caution and good judgment, keep a low profile, and remain vigilant with regard to their personal security."

Over the years, we have always felt most comfortable and at ease next to the Bosphorus, the entrancing 19-mile-long strait that connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Since it opened in June 2008, our favorite hotel has been the 170-room **FOUR SEASONS AT THE BOSPHORUS**, housed within a 19th-century Ottoman palace formerly known as the Atik Pasha. Prior to that,

we favored the adjacent 385-room **CIRAGAN PALACE KEMPINSKI**. We still recommend this property, but nowadays, it can seem rather dated in comparison with its illustrious neighbor. Some people prefer to stay in the heart of the old city, close to the Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque, and for them, the 65-room **FOUR SEASONS SULTANAHMET** is undoubtedly the best address. In our view, however, this area is fascinating but a little claustrophobic. Therefore, we invariably choose to avoid the crowds and to seek a room with a view of the water.

The Bosphorus flows swiftly, and even though it passes through a major city, it is astonishingly clean and clear. In part, this is because it is the outflow of the rivers Don, Dnieper and Danube, all of which empty into the Black Sea. At its narrowest, it is 2,300 feet wide (slightly less than half a mile) and in the middle, it is up to 400 feet deep. However, it is also relatively deep right next to the edge, which means that huge tankers and warships glide past, seemingly just at the end of people's gardens. Today, the Asian shore is where this booming metropolis still has room to grow. As a result, it has become suddenly fashionable and now boasts several small, charming hideaway hotels. Although they will probably appeal principally to those who have been to Istanbul before, they are wonderful places to relax.

Sumahan on the Water

THIS ATTRACTIVE 18-ROOM HOTEL OCCUPYING A three-story brick-and-stone former raki distillery is the brainchild of Turkish-American architects Mark and Nedret Butler. Roughly equidistant from the Bosphorus Bridge and the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, it is perched right at the edge of the water. The hotel may be reached by a complimentary boat shuttle from the European shore or by car across the Bosphorus Bridge. A taxi to the center of town usually takes about 35 minutes and costs a modest \$15.

On a rainy spring morning, our welcome proved warm, and the book-filled library adjacent to the reception desk seemed an appealing place to sit for a few minutes while the staff confirmed that our duplex Loft Suite was ready. Escorted to our room by a charming young woman, we instantly knew this was where we would happily base ourselves during an extended visit to Istanbul. In our opinion, very few duplex suites work — you constantly seem to be going up and down stairs in search of something on the other level — but this one was a delight, with a woodburning fireplace in the cozy sitting room on the main floor, from which French doors opened onto a grassy



verge beside the Bosphorus and the stone-paved walkway leading to the hotel's jetty.

The main living area came with a wool-flannel sofa, a plasma-screen television with a DVD player on which to watch movies from the hotel's video library, and a half-bath with a shower. A proper stairway with a railing and wide wooden steps led up to the bedroom loft, which had two small windows overlooking the Bosphorus, and a large, very comfortable bed. The full bath was clad in mouse-gray marble worked in an intriguing checkerboard pattern and provided a soaking tub and stall shower, plus Turkish toiletries, including olive oil soap and spice-scented shampoo and lotion.

The property's excellent seafood restaurant, *Kordon*, actually preceded the hotel, having moved to the site in 2001. In fair weather, tables are set outside beneath an awning, from where there is a mesmerizing view of the water and the Bosphorus Bridge. The menu makes some charming seasonal suggestions, such as, "When fall arrives you will love the taste of Gypsy Bonito" and "As the snow falls in winter, the turbot start to show up." Other dining options are available nearby, most notably the wonderful traditional Turkish restaurant *Ciya* in the busy Kadiköy district just south of the hotel.

Returning from a superb lunch one afternoon, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon in the hotel's beautiful Turkish bath. Though the female spa attendant spoke only a little English, it sufficed to guide us through a deeply relaxing hour that began with a sauna and continued with a brisk exfoliation, a vigorous rinse, a full-body lathering and a final soaking. Afterward, we retired to the adjacent relaxation room to sip tea and nibble on walnuts and dried apricots.

Overall, this exceptionally pleasant and well-run property will charm anyone who prefers smaller hotels and who also values a setting that encourages quiet contemplation. 🌿 **92** *Deluxe Room*, \$380; *Junior Suite*, \$445; *Loft Suite*, \$490. *Kuleli Cad. 51, Cengelköy, Istanbul*. Tel. (90) 216-422-8000. www.sumahan.com

A'jia

PERHAPS THE MOST ROMANTIC OF THE NEW BOUTIQUE properties on the Asian shore is A'jia, housed within an exquisite white *yali* formerly known as the Ahmet Rasim Pasha mansion. (Yalis are the extraordinarily desirable wooden residences that dot the shoreline on either side of the Bosphorus. Most date from the 19th century, but a handful can claim a lengthier pedigree.) Built as a private residence in the 1890s, it subsequently housed an

elementary school before becoming a 15-room hotel in 2005. This is now a popular weekend escape for the *beau monde* of Istanbul. Certainly, it is a charming place to stay, especially during the summer. The principal drawback is that it is a good 40 minutes from the city center by taxi (although the hotel also has a private boat that will take you down the Bosphorus in about a half-hour).

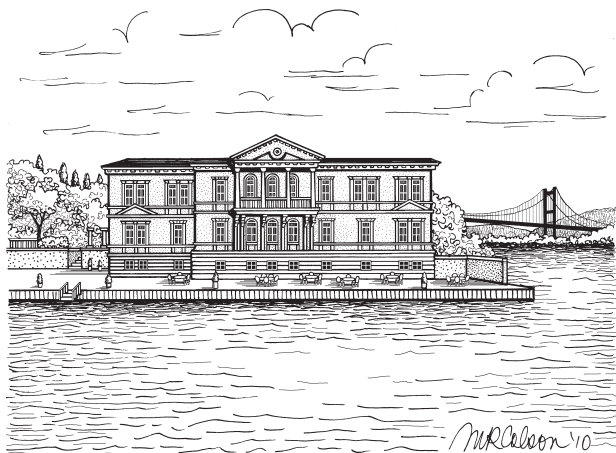
Though the contemporary interior design is rather spare, we liked our comfortable double room with its white walls, tawny parquet floors, bed made up with Italian cotton sheets, and sliding doors leading to a small private balcony with a view over the Bosphorus. (Truth be told, unless you get one of the nine rooms with a water view, you are likely to spend your time in a state of frustration and disappointment.) The bath came with Philippe Starck fixtures, a single vanity, a separate tub and shower and Acqua di Parma toiletries.

The hotel's principal amenity is an excellent restaurant serving an appealing mix of Mediterranean dishes (zucchini-flower fritters stuffed with goat cheese) and updated Turkish classics (braised lamb shank with orzo pasta and porcini mushrooms). On a sunny day, sitting at one of the tables overlooking the Bosphorus is pure bliss.

Istanbul Culinary Institute

THOUGH NOT GENERALLY WELL-KNOWN IN NORTH America, Turkish cooking is one of the world's great cuisines. We've long relished its repertoire of rich, savory and surprisingly varied dishes, so we decided to sign up for a class at the Istanbul Culinary Institute. This occupies a striking contemporary townhouse in the city's Beyoğlu neighborhood, close to the Golden Horn. The institute was founded by the amiable Hande Bozdoğan in 2008 and offers instruction for both professionals and amateurs. Bozdoğan herself lived in New York for many years, and after training as an economist and working for a bank, she discovered that cooking was her real passion. She therefore embarked on studies at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park and The French Culinary Institute in New York City, from where she obtained her chef's diploma. Our three-hour course was devoted to *mezze*, or the hors d'oeuvres that begin most Turkish meals, and it was a thoroughly professional and extremely enjoyable experience. The institute also runs a very good lunch-only restaurant that serves dishes such as zucchini fritters with dill yogurt, and grilled chicken with olive, onion, lemon and rosemary relish. *Meşrutiyet Cad. 59, Tepebaşı, Istanbul*. Tel. (90) 212-251-2214. www.istanbulculinary.com

Because of its location, A'jia is not a practical address from which to explore the classic sights of Istanbul, unless you have a car and driver at your disposal, or are willing to spend a lot of time in taxis. However, no part of Istanbul is without interest. For example, just five minutes away by boat, on the opposite side of the Bosphorus, stands the



A'jia hotel and the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge

dramatic crenellated fortress of Rumelihisari, built by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1452 while he was laying siege to Constantinople. Not only is this a remarkably imposing and historically fascinating structure, in summer it also provides a stage for a series of open-air concerts.

A'jia is very pleasant little hotel with comfortable, well-equipped rooms and friendly service. **89** *Waterfront Deluxe Room*, \$320; *Bosphorus Deluxe Room*, \$385. *Ahmet Rasim Pasa Yalisi*, *Cubuklu Cad. 27, Kanlica, Istanbul*. Tel. (90) 216-413-9300. www.ajiahotel.com

Les Ottomans

BY FAR THE MOST OPULENT OF THE SMALLER HOTELS ON the Bosphorus is Les Ottomans, situated on the European shore just over a mile upstream from the Bosphorus Bridge (and virtually opposite Sumahan on the Water). The original yali was known as the Muhsinzade Pasha mansion and was inhabited by the same family from 1790 until 1929. Badly damaged by fire in 1933, it was not fully rebuilt until 2006, when it was transformed into an astonishingly lavish boutique hotel. (The property was designed by Zeynep Fadillioğlu, a cousin of well-known international fashion designer Rifat Ozbek.)

Although there is much to admire about Les Ottomans, we also have some serious reservations. Chief among these is the breathtaking expense of the 10 suites, the cheapest of which costs more than \$1,000 a night. Only three suites offer full Bosphorus views, and these range

from \$2,300 to \$3,870. Six suites have so-called “garden views,” which in some instances means they overlook the busy (and noisy) shore road. Essentially, Les Ottomans seeks to attract the high-society, supermodel, movie-star market. Which, alas, leaves humble folk like us feeling a little out of place!

However, it is ever our policy to give credit where credit is due, and some aspects of the hotel are quite remarkable. For example, the restaurant *Su Yani 29* serves delicious international and Turkish cuisine and has a sublime terrace shaded by huge white umbrellas at the edge of the Bosphorus. The interior of the restaurant is equally lovely, with tall windows overlooking the water, a dramatic painted ceiling and a huge fireplace. And the exquisite *Kavmahal* wine room provides private-dining facilities for parties of up to 12 people. In the basement, the 2,400-square-foot Caudalie Vinothérapie spa — generally rated the best in Istanbul — has an astonishing marble hammam with a star-painted dome. And the guest rooms are every bit as lavish as you might imagine, with gold paintwork, richly patterned silks, walls covered with Venetian velvet, crystal chandeliers and fine antiques. The baths are fit for one of the more self-indulgent Ottoman sultans!

The hotel has three boats available for charter: *Mahuu*, a six-person speedboat; *Les Ottomans*, a 55-foot traditional wooden craft, suitable for cruising the Bosphorus; and *Ma Biche*, an elegant 110-foot motor yacht with five cabins and six crew, which is ideal for voyaging farther afield into the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean islands. **93** *Suite (garden view)*, from \$1,030; *Suite (partial Bosphorus view)*, \$1,290; *Suite (full Bosphorus view)*, from \$2,320. *Muallim Naci Cad. 68, Kurucesme, Beyoğlu, Istanbul*. Tel. (90) 212-359-1500. www.lesottomans.com

W Istanbul

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN FANS OF THE STARWOOD HOTEL group’s self-consciously hip “W” hotel brand, but we allowed ourselves to be swayed by the recommendations of friends in Istanbul, plus several effusive reviews in the mainstream travel press, and checked in for a night. On arrival, we immediately realized that we had made a serious mistake. The 134-room W Istanbul is located in the convenient Beşiktaş neighborhood, immediately behind the enormous Dolmabahçe Palace that fronts a long stretch of the European shore of the Bosphorus. Although the property occupies several handsome old Ottoman row houses, none of their exterior charm has been preserved inside. Indeed, the hotel’s low-lit lobby looked like the entrance to a discotheque, with misbegotten

faux-harem décor that reminded us of a Las Vegas casino steakhouse — with service to match.

Our “Fabulous” room was anything but, and came with a crumpled candy wrapper under the desk, a maddeningly complicated telephone and a blizzard of irritating hang cards urging us to “get wired,” “relax” and “seek bliss.” We found the Arabic-themed, jewel-tone décor to be cloying, and also didn’t appreciate a €15 fee for Internet access. The comfortable bed came with goose-down pillows, and the bath was well-designed, with two contemporary sinks posed on a marble counter, and a large stall shower. However, the room was surprisingly worn for such a new hotel — it opened in May 2008 — with drapes that had been pulled out of their glider and a terrace door that wouldn’t shut properly.

The hotel’s amenities include a restaurant/bar and a small gym, but frankly, we can’t think of a single reason anyone would be happy staying here. Adding insult to injury, after carefully explaining to the concierge that we love Turkish food, he booked us at *Mimolett*, a new restaurant he raved about, which turned out to serve expensive and unremarkable French food. **74 Fabulous Room**, from \$380. *Suleyman Seba Cad. 22, Akaretler, Beşiktaş, Istanbul. Tel. (90) 212-381-2121. www.whotels.com*

Park Hyatt Istanbul – Maçka Palas

JUST A FEW BLOCKS AWAY, THE 90-ROOM PARK HYATT is housed within the Maçka Palas, the former Italian ambassador’s residence, a handsome 1922 art deco building. The hotel overlooks Maçka Park in the chic Nişantaşı neighborhood, the equivalent of New York’s Upper East Side or London’s Knightsbridge. An insight offered by a Turkish friend explains much of the appeal of this well-run boutique property. “Istanbulers would no more dream of staying in a hotel in Sultanahmet (the tourist-heavy district where Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque are located) than most Londoners would want to check in to a place next to the Tower of London.”

On our arrival, a smiling doorman immediately dealt with our luggage and then ushered us through the soaring skylit lobby, which also features a circular wine bar that is a popular rendezvous for affluent locals. In common with many Park Hyatts, the guest rooms have soothing color schemes in bronze, celadon and ivory, which seem to have been inspired by Asian ceramics. Our bright and spacious Park Spa King room featured a pine floor, a chaise longue and side chair, a large desk with all of the expected electronics, and a very comfortable bed with a dark wood headboard and perfect reading lights. (All

the lights, including the pretty Ottoman chandelier, were easily operated from panels on either side of the bed.) The walls were decorated with striking black-and-white photos, prints of classic images taken by Ara Güler, a celebrated Turkish photojournalist now in his 80s and known as “the eye of Istanbul.” The ingeniously designed and very stylish walnut-paneled bath featured a heated limestone floor, double vanities and a “wet room” with a deep freestanding soaking tub and a walk-in shower that doubled as a steam room. The high-quality toiletries came from well-known French perfumer Blaise Maubin.

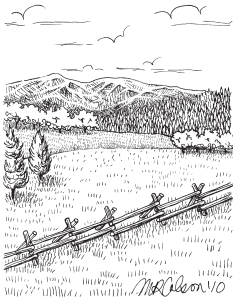
Amenities at the Park Hyatt include a glamorous 60-foot rooftop swimming pool that is a delight during the scorching summer months, a fitness center and an exceptional spa. Since we enjoy Turkish food, we doubted that we would eat at *The Prime*, an American-style steakhouse that is the hotel’s signature restaurant, but one rainy night, a Caesar salad and a good rib eye turned out to be just the ticket.

All told, the Park Hyatt is worth considering as an alternative to the extremely expensive palace hotels on the Bosphorus or their competitors around Taksim Square. In a city as tumultuous as Istanbul, we also found that we liked being based in such a peaceful neighborhood. **90 Park Spa King**, \$555; **Park Suite King**, \$785. *Bronz Sokak 4, Tesvikiye, Istanbul. Tel. (90) 212-315-1234. www.istanbul.park.hyatt.com*

Bosphorus View Restaurant

TOPAZ OPENED IN NOVEMBER 2007 AND HAS SINCE acquired a deserved reputation as one of best and most beautiful of the city’s restaurants. Conveniently located in the central Gümüşsuyu district, it is a sophisticated place that attracts a stylish international crowd. Excellent Turkish and Mediterranean dishes are served in a parquet-floored dining room with glass-bubble chandeliers that affords sensational views over the Bosphorus. At dinner one night, we chose the prix-fixe Degustation Menu, a selection of traditional Ottoman dishes that began with yogurt, chickpea and meatball soup, continued with artichokes with wild rice and mustard; a *börek*, or cheese-filled savory pastry; stuffed grape leaves with sour cherries and yogurt; and grilled lamb loin with smoked eggplant purée, wheat pilaf and minted onion relish, and concluded with clotted cream with cinnamon. The service was prompt and included the attentions of a charming French sommelier who displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of Turkey’s excellent wines. *Inönü Cad. 50, Istanbul. Tel. (90) 212-249-1001. www.topazistanbul.com*

The Ranch at Rock Creek Makes a Spectacular Debut



THE FULFILLMENT OF A childhood dream for James Manley, the founder of Atlantic-Pacific Capital in Greenwich, Conn., The Ranch at Rock Creek takes its name from a blue-ribbon

trout stream that flows out of the wilderness along the Continental Divide.

Clear and cold, the creek tumbles over boulders, spills into a long, lush valley, then cuts through a canyon and two national forests before joining the Clark Fork River, 50 miles downstream. The 6,600-acre ranch straddles the creek for four of those miles. Cottonwoods and willows crowd the banks, and beyond are the snowy summits of the Anaconda, Sapphire and Flint Creek mountains.

Rock Creek is a Montana ranch from a picture book: broad hayfields dotted with stock ponds; grassy hills rising to uplands covered with sagebrush and stands of pine; endless rail fences; attractive ranch buildings spread on both sides of the creek; and a row of canvas tents bordering the stream. Cattle graze among the cottonwoods. A band of mares, some with spring foals, collects along the fence line. Nothing is missing from the romantic fantasy.

We drove from the Missoula airport, a 90-minute scenic route that took us past the small restored mining

town of Philipsburg. We arrived at The Granite Lodge, a sprawling log-and-stone structure with a rusted metal roof, set on a slope above the creek. This contains the reception area, a large dining room, a rustically elegant lounge with a fireplace, a compact spa, nine guest rooms and suites and a sod-roofed “saloon.” A friendly staffer greeted us and ushered us to the bar. There we were introduced to the spa manager and the activities director, with whom we arranged the next day’s pursuits.

During our visit, the attentive and competent staff clearly outnumbered the handful of guests; they seemed proud of the ranch and wanted us to enjoy it to the fullest. In keeping with that goal, the property includes virtually everything in one up-front price. This encourages the guests to have a good time without keeping one eye on the tab. Even waders, life vests and coolers filled with local microbrews are included. Each guest gets a bicycle for personal use around the ranch. And one room in the barn is filled with cowboy paraphernalia for guests who’d like to dress the part — no extra charge. Spa treatments are extra, as are guided off-premises fishing trips.

The accommodations come in different categories and locations. Nine more conventional rooms (some of them smallish) are housed within Granite Lodge. A quarter-mile away — five minutes by bicycle — there is a barn with two lodgings (avoid “Wrangler,” which is gloomy and has no view), a romantic log cabin and eight wood-and-canvas cabins bordering the creek. These look like tents, but they’re warmed by gas fireplaces; comfy chairs invite lounging; and plush beds let you fall asleep listening to the water flow by. Luxurious private bathhouses, one for each tent, are just steps away. Finally, two log homes offer three and five bedrooms, respectively.

Three lodgings stand out. We particularly liked “The Loft,” set within the spacious restored 1890s barn, with its high planked ceiling, rugged timbers and whitewashed board walls. The reclaimed-barnwood floor is covered with patterned rugs; handcrafted bookshelves have been built along one wall; the king bed comes with a wingback headboard; and a chest of drawers sports antler pulls. One end of the room is devoted to a charming bath with twin vanities set in a rugged bench, a slipper tub for two in front of a floor-to-ceiling paned window, and a separate oversize shower with pebble floor.

From the barn, a flagstone path leads past a small flower garden to “Bluebird Cabin,” the most romantic



spot on the ranch, positioned for privacy at the edge of the rushing creek. Here, rusticity gives way to polished wood floors, thick rugs and cream-colored walls. A king-size four-poster canopy bed crafted from slender white birches faces a cozy sitting area and a wall of French doors that open onto a screened porch overlooking the creek. There's a wet bar, a work desk, a deluxe audio system and a large flat-screen TV that slides away at the touch of a button. Nearly a third of the 950-square-foot cabin is devoted to the bath, with a sauna at one end and a deep tub with creek view at the other. Between are twin vanities, a dressing area and separate shower. On the private screened porch, upholstered chaises longues sit below infrared heaters that can be turned on when the air is cool — a heavenly spot for a quiet tête-à-tête.

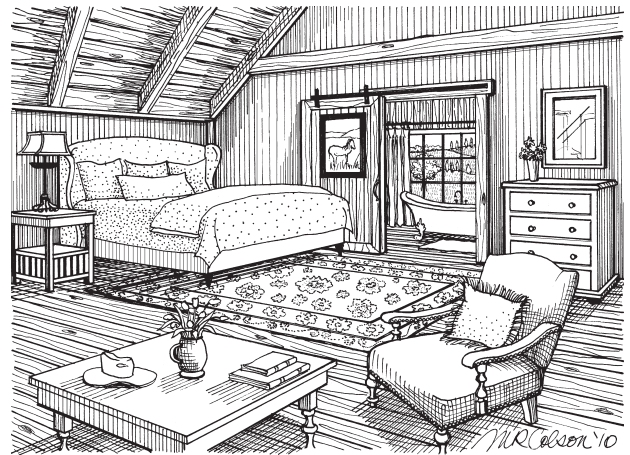
And we envied the guests who had reserved the “Trapper” cabin, located a quarter-mile upstream from the other creekside lodgings. The bright, canvas-walled bedroom/living room holds an iron king bed flanked by painted chests, as well as a cozy sitting area with a gas fireplace. The small adjoining kitchen contains a farmhouse sink in a stainless-steel countertop, a small refrigerator and a wine cooler. A spacious bath comes with a pebble-floored shower, dressing area and twin vanities. And a large etched-glass window faces the creek and a private streamside veranda, where a deep hot tub invites open-air soaks. The 10-minute bike ride to the dining room makes it less convenient than other lodging options, but its seclusion is part of the allure.

Guests eat together in the convivial dining room at round tables that encourage socializing. A central fireplace warms the room, and bright Southwestern-style fabrics on the chairs add color. The service is relaxed, never stuffy, and we were consistently pleased with the meals from chef Josh Drage's ranch kitchen. One evening we had George's Bank sea scallops with white bean purée, cashew romesco sauce and braised leeks, and a perfectly done Montana rib eye with white cheddar gratin and grilled asparagus. Another night, our line-caught Alaskan king salmon on wilted organic spinach with a chili-lime glaze was delicious, and we loved the lemon tart dessert. The chef and the sommelier consulted on interesting wine pairings. Other mealtime options can be arranged, such as having a picnic lunch delivered to your terrace or your hiking destination.

We passed on the picnic but scheduled a hike, despite threatening weather. Through high-plateau wildflowers and sagebrush, we headed for a ridge that looked to hold a promising archaeological site. But off to the west, we could see a heavy rainstorm moving toward us across

7,200-foot Skalkaho Pass. Fortunately, the storm skirted us to the north, and we were able to enjoy our trek back to the ranch through open stands of aspen and fir. On our visit, Rock Creek was still swollen by snowmelt and heavy spring rains, and fly-fishing was not an option. But the high water made for good floating in a raft manned by the previous night's bartender, who proved to be as adept with the oars as he was with a cocktail shaker, and quick to spot browsing moose and deer.

The day's activities may start at the well-equipped Rod & Gun Club near the barns and the corral, but they invariably end at the unique and (to our surprise) irresistible *Silver Dollar Saloon*. There we found a silver



“The Loft” at The Ranch at Rock Creek

dollar-studded bar, saddle-topped barstools, a high-tech four-lane bowling alley, a pool table, a table shuffleboard game, foosball, a karaoke stage and a 14-foot high-density TV screen. The place fairly overflows with infectious fun.

The cool, tranquil spa occupies a wing of the main lodge and makes a welcome stop after horseback riding, hiking or mountain biking. Decorated with light wood and white-painted furnishings, it has five treatment rooms and a sauna, and offers a full menu of therapies, from facials and wraps to massages and hot-stone treatments, along with manicures and pedicures. One room contains a deep freestanding tub, the inviting venue for a “Saddle Sore Soak” in a custom herbal blend.

Overall, this is a fine new property, and it joins The Resort at Paws Up and Triple Creek Ranch on a select list of Montana retreats where you can experience the thrill of the great outdoors, but still eat exceptionally well and sleep soundly in sophisticated comfort. 🌿 **94** *Springfield or Sharps lodge room, \$950 per person; Bluebird Cabin, The Loft or Trapper canvas cabin, \$1,150 per person. 79 Carriage House Lane, Philipsburg, Montana 59858. Tel. (877) 786-1545. www.theranchatrockcreek.com*



WHAT'S HOT, WHAT'S NOT

THIS REGULAR COLUMN SUMMARIZES THE OBSERVATIONS OF READERS AND **DOES NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE OPINION OF YOUR EDITOR**. Based on the hundreds of letters, emails, critique cards and forum posts we review each month, the following hotels and resorts received the most revealing positive and/or negative comments —

↑ **CROSBY STREET HOTEL** *New York, NY* — A newcomer to fashionable SoHo, this “cozy and comfortable” boutique property is already attracting fulsome praise for “fabulous” rooms that are “wonderfully bright” thanks to “spectacular floor-to-ceiling windows” and staff that are “friendly and obliging.” All in all, the hotel is “just lovely.”

↑ **AMANYARA** *Turks & Caicos* — This “beautiful place” has “perfect” accommodations, food that is “out of this world,” a “great spa” and “excellent service,” a combination that makes it “an incredible experience” and a “first-class resort in every respect.” The only caveat is that “pricing in the Caribbean islands seems to be out of control” and roughly twice “what it is for comparable properties in Hawaii or Mexico.”

↑ **LITTLE DIX BAY** *Virgin Gorda, BVI* — A perennial favorite with Harper members, this “spectacular” resort offers “absolutely gorgeous” accommodations, “well-trained staff,” a “glorious beach” and food that is “over the top excellent!” The “really fun activities for children” draw consistent praise. One correspondent speaks for the majority when she writes that this “is without doubt one of the nicest places we’ve ever stayed.”

↑ **POSADA DEL ANGEL** *Guatemala* — Tucked away in the lovely old Spanish colonial city of Antigua, this “perfectly located” hideaway is “marvelously atmospheric” and treats its guests to “delicious breakfasts” served by “extremely friendly and helpful staff.” Overall, it is a “haven of tranquility,” the only hint of criticism being reserved for rooms that “are a little dark.”

↑ **LONGITUDE 131°** *Australia* — “Top-notch service,” “very knowledgeable guides” and “wonderful food” are just part of the appeal at this “spectacular” desert hideaway near Ayers Rock. One correspondent found the whole experience “stupendous.”

↑ **BLANKET BAY** *New Zealand* — This splendid sanctuary on the South Island’s Lake Wakatipu prompts ecstatic reviews. The “architecture and decoration are incredible,” and the mountain views simply “amazing.” Also, “the food was very good.” One couple celebrated their wedding anniversary with a “fabulous” private dinner in the wine cellar at which “the service was outstanding.” Another guest required capitals to make her feelings plain: “FANTASTIC” and “INCREDIBLE.”

↔ **SUNSET KEY** *Key West, FL* — The “spacious” cottages at this private

island resort are “clean, well-appointed and comfortable.” One correspondent had “a fine time,” thanks to “great staff and a friendly bar poolside,” but others are less content, finding the property “understaffed” and the food merely “OK,” deficiencies that mean it is “not on a par with other top-rated resorts.”

↔ **MALLIOUHANA HOTEL & SPA** *Anguilla* — “Terrific facilities” and a “simply beautiful” dining room distinguish this classic Caribbean resort, as do the “water slide and water sports” that make it a “great place for those traveling with children.” However, despite the property’s reputation for fine French cuisine, one writer found the food “good, but not great” and another disgruntled patron complains that some restaurant staff could be “sullen and curt.”

↓ **THE REEFS** *Bermuda* — Despite a “breathtaking view” and a “new spa,” this hotel is described as “old and outdated,” with “furniture, linens and finishes of low quality,” and “limited room service.” Having chosen the property “because of Harper’s recommendation,” one member writes that he is “obviously very disappointed.”

↓ **ZOETRY PARAISO DE LA BONITA** *Mexico* — “Missed wake-up calls,” plus “below-average” food and “poorly trained” staff are all cited as reasons for displeasure. One member writes plaintively, “They never got our room service order right even when we wrote it out in detail and handed it to them the night before,” an experience that means “we would never stay there again.”

↓ **CAESAR PARK** *Brazil* — On a hot day in Rio “they could not get our air-conditioning to work sufficiently.” A “mediocre dinner” did not improve matters, nor did “a cracked mirror” and a “worn carpet” that “did not look clean.” At least the property is “located right across from the beach” and Ipanema is “the safest area in Rio.”



For an explanation of ratings and hummingbird symbols, check the *Hideaway Report Online* on the member website.

Rates provided are published nightly room rates and are subject to change. Call the Andrew Harper Travel Office for the best available rates, (800) 375-4685.

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