Andrew Harper’s Hideaway Report

JANUARY 2013 | OUR 34TH YEAR

TRAVELING THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF TRULY ENCHANTING PLACES

2013 Grand Award Winners

Each year, we have the pleasure of recalling our travel experiences over the past 12 months and singling out a number of particularly memorable hotels and resorts. To be considered for our annual awards, properties must be relatively small in size, possess strong individual personalities, offer relaxing atmospheres and demonstrate a consistent devotion to personal service.

HIDEAWAY OF THE YEAR

Awasi — A Sophisticated Oasis in Chile’s Spellbinding Atacama Desert

When NASA scientists want to test the capabilities of their Mars exploration vehicles, they come to the Atacama. Stretching for 600 miles south of the Peruvian border, it is the driest place on earth. The desert’s 40,000 square miles contain vast tracts of red sand, 20,000-foot active volcanoes and, thanks to snowmelt runoff, a marvelous variety of animals, birds and plants.

We had opted to stay at Awasi, just outside the bustling oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama. Modeled after the traditional architecture of Tular, an Indian site dating from 800 B.C., the heart of the property is defined by sienna-hued adobe walls inset with rows of local stones. Inviting chaises longues flank a small pool, and thatched roofs cover an open-air dining area. Displays of local handicrafts, plus colorful throw pillows (their cases made from native rugs), help to create a design scheme reminiscent of the best of Santa Fe.

Five of Awasi’s eight rooms are set around this central area. Adobe walls and dark-wood floors are enhanced by dramatic lighting schemes. There is no air-conditioning, but the traditional construction ensures a reliable flow of cool air. Baths are faced with stone, come with separate showers and lead to private patios. Rooms #1, #3 and #5 are the largest; for additional space, they can be combined with the smaller #2 and #4. The other three rooms are across a road in a separate compound. Taken together, they would be ideal for a large family group.

Having booked at Awasi, you receive a 17-page list of possible activities. Each room has its own dedicated guide, driver and four-wheel-drive vehicle. Highlights of our stay included a hike through the so-called “Valley of the Moon,” with its crystalline salt formations that eerily groan and creak as the temperature changes, and an excursion to El Tatio geysers, a field of geothermal springs in which our guide boiled eggs for breakfast.

The food at the resort is exceptional. Some of the dining room staff are not fluent in English, but their solicitous attitude is more than sufficient compensation. Overall, the tone is set by the charming manager, whose vocabulary does not include the word “no.”

For personalized trip-planning assistance, call (800) 375-4685 or email reservations@andrewharper.com
AndrewHarper.com | For comments and inquiries concerning the Hideaway Report, please email aharper@andrewharper.com
North America

Hidden Pond

Kennebunkport, Maine — The delightful enclave of Hidden Pond is located 10 minutes northeast of Kennebunkport. With 36 cottages and bungalows set in 60 acres of seaside forest, it is a captivating world unto itself. When it opened in 2008, the lack of dining facilities dimmed its appeal. Last year, however, the resort added a restaurant, Earth, which is under the direction of highly regarded Boston chef Ken Oringer. The cottages are arrayed around the Adirondack-style main lodge. Their attributes include screened porches, outdoor showers, stone gas fireplaces, full baths for each bedroom and full kitchens. We opted for one of the new bungalows, cozy and well-designed structures that come with screened sitting areas.

An inviting pool is surrounded by chaises longues, while nearby is the delightful Tree Spa, with three tree house-style treatment rooms. One of the most beautiful beaches in Maine, Goose Rocks Beach, is a short drive away. We relished one of the most beautiful beaches in Maine, Goose Rocks Beach, is a short drive away. We relished the multitude of amenities and, most important, the friendly staff impressed us greatly. Bungalow, $675 per night (high season for a three-night minimum stay); two-bedroom cottage, $1,050. 354 Goose Rocks Road, Kennebunkport. Tel. (207) 967-9050. hiddenpondmaine.com

The Canyon Suites at The Phoenician

Scottsdale, Arizona — A 60-room boutique hotel-within-a-hotel, The Canyon Suites at The Phoenician is an oasis of tranquility, despite being attached to a huge resort with 647 rooms, eight swimming pools, three nine-hole golf courses and a 22,000-square-foot spa.

After check-in, a Canyon Suites “ambassador” walked us to our room, taking pains to explain the multitude of amenities and, most important, entry to the private Canyon Suites swimming pool. Our 600-square-foot Canyon Room offered comfortable contemporary furnishings and a well-lit bath with a generous travertine shower stall and vanities surrounded by speckled granite. From our second-floor balcony, we had a mesmerizing view of saguaro-studded Camelback Mountain.

It became my routine each afternoon to bring a book to the private pool and to read a chapter or two in the shade of an umbrella. Those wishing to make a day of it should reserve one of the 10 cabanas, which have their own refrigerators and full baths. When not basking poolside, we enjoyed strolls through the grounds, especially the Cactus Garden, a delightful strip of desert greenery set between one of the two main buildings and Camelback.

The J&G Steakhouse is a stylish Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant with views across Scottsdale. Here, we sampled the delicious tasting menu, which included creamy tuna tartare with avocado and ginger, a smoky asparagus risotto, a delicate steamed halibut with black beans and artichoke hearts, and a perfectly cooked filet mignon with tangy J&G steak sauce. I left Canyon Suites with considerable regret.

Bud Billiken

Chicago, Illinois — A city with over 200 hotels, the one in our corner is the Crowne Plaza Chicago Downtown, featuring 17 stories of 349 guest rooms, eight swimming pools, three nine-hole golf courses and a full-service spa.

At check-in, a concierge took pains to explain the multitude of amenities and, most important, the friendly staff impressed us greatly. To the private pool and to read a chapter or two the centerpiece was a free-standing soaking tub, where overhead, a starscape of Swarovski crystals lit up at the touch of a switch. Near the vanity, a door opened onto a private cedar-paneled sauna/steam room. But what elevated the experience was its floor-to-ceiling glass wall that framed an unobstructed view of shimmering Okanagan Lake 1,250 feet below.

Best Family Resort

The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe provides an atmosphere convivial for young and old alike. For $100 per child, the “Indoor Campout Package” ensures that your guest room will include a cozy, linen-lined children’s tent, complete with a teddy bear and s’mores kit. Judging from the reaction of my niece, this is money well spent. Besides being located 50 yards away from Northstar’s Kid’s Ski + Board School, the hotel also offers a supervised program for children, with seasonal activities such as snowshoe hikes and scavenger hunts.

Bardessono

Yountville, California — Despite its setting in the heart of the Napa Valley, the spare construction of Bardessono is more reminiscent of Southern California. The 62-room resort opened in February 2009, and its rooftop pool provides wonderful views of the Stags Leap Palisades and the Mayacamas Mountains. Yountville is an engaging town of 4,000, famous for its Thomas Keller restaurants (preeminently The French Laundry), all of which are within walking distance.

Accommodations are divided into three categories: King Spa-Suite, Steam Spa-Suite and Tufa Suite. The first two are similar, with 550 square feet of indoor space, living areas with gas fireplaces, bottom-jetted tubs, separate showers and private outdoor areas. The 780-square-foot Tufa Suites have living spaces separated from the bedrooms by see-through gas fireplaces. All baths are designed for in-room spa treatments, with stowed massage tables.

Yountville probably has more Michelin stars per capita than any other municipality on the planet. The food at Bardessono is quite good, but would I opt for a dinner there over one of Keller’s establishments, or the creative fare at Redd on Washington Street? Probably not.

There was talk a few years ago of Keller opening an inn across the street from The French Laundry, but at the moment, Yountville doesn’t need it. Bardessono is the best new hotel to open in Napa since Poetry Inn.

King Spa-Suite, $450; Tufa Suite, $600. 6526 Yount Street, Yountville. Tel. (707) 204-6000. BARDESSONO.COM
The Meridian Club

Turks and Caicos — Set on the private island of Pine Cay, a 30-minute boat ride from Provo, The Meridian Club is the crown jewel of the Turks and Caicos for those seeking the timeless and relaxing spirit of the old West Indies.

Just 13 guest rooms tumble onto a deserted white-sand beach. Decorated with Haitian paintings and handcrafted furnishings, the simple, comfortable accommodations come with king beds and separate sitting alcoves opening onto screened porches. Spacious baths feature two vanity areas and indoor/outdoor showers. Overhead fans and louvered windows circulate the island’s year-round breeze.

An obliging staff tends to guests’ every need in a clubhouse trimmed by a scenic veranda. The informal dining room spills out to a terrace with tables beneath thatched umbrellas and a newly upgraded pool. Complementing the superlative two-mile beach, the resort provides a small flotilla of sailboats, plus daily snorkeling forays to a nearby national park reef. Spa services and bonefishing excursions are also available. This sanctuary will not appeal to everyone, but for beach lovers who yearn to truly get away from it all, nothing quite compares.

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Tierra Patagonia

Chile — Shared between Chile and Argentina, southern Patagonia is chiefly a land of vast, desolate steppes. High precipitation and cold air combine to create huge glaciers that spill into numerous fjords. The scenically dramatic Torres del Paine National Park lies a four-hour drive from the airport at Punta Arenas.

Located on the eastern border of the park, the new Tierra Patagonia Hotel & Spa recalls an “old fossil, a prehistoric animal beached on the lakeshore, like those drawn by Charles Darwin,” according to its architect, Cazu Zegers. Inside, the utterly remarkable building is dominated by a grand sweep of immense floor-to-ceiling windows. Once I could drag my gaze from the extraordinary view across Lago Sarmiento to the breathtaking granite monoliths of the Cordillera del Paine, I became more and more impressed.

Constructed almost entirely from native lenga wood, the great room seamlessly unites a sitting area with a bar and a dining space. The interplay of a wood ceiling, walls constructed from boards of differing lengths, and wood floorboards laid at an angle gives the design a remarkable feeling of energy and flow. The 40 guest rooms (including three duplex suites) display the same aesthetic and are appointed with simple but handsome furniture that imparts a Shaker-like elegance to their interiors. Well-lit with simple but handsome furniture that imparts a Shaker-like elegance to their interiors. Well-lit with simple but handsome furniture that imparts a Shaker-like elegance to their interiors.

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Stay, it seemed that the kitchen was still getting up to speed, but many dishes were excellent, and we particularly enjoyed succulent, firm-fleshed reineta fish served with shrimp on a bed of lentils. The service was prompt and friendly. The service was prompt and friendly.

Lapostolle Residence

Chile — Just west of Santiago lies a rich agricultural region known as the Central Valley, a delightful area of fields, orchards and vineyards blessed by a benign climate. This is the heart of Chile’s burgeoning wine industry.

Among the names you will find on Chilean wine labels are the Aconcagua, Maipo, Cachapoal and Colchagua valleys. Lapostolle is set in the Colchagua Valley and is the realized dream of Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle, a scion of the family that created the French liqueur Grand Marnier. Today, Lapostolle produces a range of wines, preeminent among which is Clos Apalta, a red blend of Carmenère, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. In 2008, Wine Spectator named the 2005 Clos Apalta its wine of the year.

The Lapostolle Residence is set above the winery and comprises a Main House, plus four sumptuous casitas. The latter have wood floors, accents of leather and colored silk, and woodburning fires. The baths are clad in stone tile and are equipped with soaking tubs and separate showers. The Main House is a study in contemporary elegance, with a spacious living room/library that leads out to a lovely terrace where meals are taken, weather permitting. The food is superb, and we savored dishes such as grilled shrimp with barley risotto, and filet of beef in a red-wine reduction. Different Lapostolle wines are served with each course, and we especially admired the Casa Sauvignon Blanc and the Cuvée Alexandre Pinot Noir. Activities include horseback riding and tours of neighboring wineries.

The Lapostolle Residence is a place of gracious hospitality. It should feature on the itinerary of anyone with an interest in wine, and, given its relative proximity to Santiago’s airport, it provides a perfect end to a Chilean journey.
Algodon Mansion

Buenos Aires — For anyone who shares my preference for intimate hotels, the 10-suite Algodon Mansion in Buenos Aires’ chic and leafy Recoleta neighborhood — the equivalent of Manhattan’s Upper East Side — is a fine base from which to explore the sprawling Argentine capital.

Housed within a 1912 French classical-style limestone mansion, it was developed by Scott Mathis, chairman and CEO of DPEC Partners, a New York-based real estate investment group, and opened two years ago to rave reviews in the mainstream travel press. (Mathis has also invested in a sister property on a 2,500-acre wine estate in Mendoza.) On our arrival, the bellhop greeted us by name and was thoroughly warm and welcoming. Our suite proved to be large, quiet and bright, with a beautifully polished ebony-stained oak floor and a velvet armchair that was perfect for reading. The huge bath, faced with French limestone and Italian Calacatta marble, provided an enormous walk-in shower and a soaking tub, L’Occitane toiletries and piles of fluffy white towels.

The Algodon’s Chez Nous restaurant, with burgundy silk-clad walls, a gold-leaved and a woodburning fireplace, is a relaxed and stylish place for dinner. Chef Antonio Soriano’s stated ambition is to reinvent traditional and regional dishes with French-inspired culinary techniques. (Most of the fruit and vegetables, as well as the olive oil, come from Algodon Wine Estates.) We settled for grilled lamb chops with Andean potatoes, and black bass with black-olive gnocchi, both of which were excellent. Amenities at the hotel include a small spa, a workout room with a superb restaurant. Although not a luxury destination, this distinctive hotel is very comfortable. On our arrival, Guido, a friendly Argentinean, settled us into a small but pretty room with a beamed ceiling, a wood-plank floor and faded chintz curtains. Having freshened up, we descended for lunch. This proved to be a superb meal of prawns wrapped in bacon on a bed of tomatoes with red onions in a lemon vinaigrette, and a lamb T-bone with oven-blasted potatoes seasoned with tapenade. The Argentinean wines — a dry Chardonnay-Viognier and a Petit Verdot — were first-rate.

Dinner comprised grilled beets with goat cheese and garlic chips, followed by an excellent steak cooked over a eucalyptus wood fire. It is a testament to the quality of the food that, although we weren’t at all hungry, we thoroughly enjoyed every last morsel.

Most Charming Inn

Garzón, a tiny town 20 miles north of José Ignacio in Uruguay, is undergoing a renaissance. Outsiders are busy restoring the old brick houses that surround its tidy main square. Among them is renowned Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, proprietor of El Garzón, an enchanting five-room inn with a superb restaurant.

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Playa Vik

Uruguay — Playa Vik José Ignacio is the work of Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott, who also designed the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and the Opéra Bastille in Paris. The property opened last year and comprises four suites and six pavilions (with two or three bedrooms). A spectacular lap pool is cantilevered over an expanse of lawn, and museum-quality modern art is displayed in the sculpture pavilion, a striking structure containing two pieces by Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, among works of other world-class artists. Overall, the place has an upscale bohemian personality.

The seafront complex is surrounded by a wall that encloses limestone, concrete, titanium and glass structures in a landscaped garden. The pavilions are ideal for families, while the four suites are better suited to couples. Our rhomboid-shaped room, “Fuerteventura,” proved to be the ultimate in sea-shack chic, with teak floors, white walls and striking photographs. A very comfortable bed was made up in Frette sheets, and a dressing room came containing two pieces by Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, among works of other world-class artists. Overall, the place has an upscale bohemian personality.

We were a little disappointed with the food and beverage options. Fortunately, there are numerous good restaurants in José Ignacio, and most guests dine out for both lunch and dinner. Amenities at the resort include a small spa, a workout room with a sauna, and a sunken barbecue pit. If you require 24-hour room service and a serviced beach, then Playa Vik is not for you. If, on the other hand, you are content with an easygoing seaside existence and appreciate contemporary art and design, this remarkable property just might become one of your favorite hotels.

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and his Irish wife, Kay, who purchased Ballyfin in 2002 and restored the house over a period of nine years. Today, the 15 guest rooms reflect their passion for detail. The walls of our bedroom were hung with 18th-century tapestries, mirrors by Thomas Chippendale and a collection of Irish art from the 18th century to the present.

This grandeur exists today thanks to the dedication of American businessman Fred Krehbiel and his Irish wife, Kay, who purchased Ballyfin in 2002 and restored the house over a period of nine years. Today, the 15 guest rooms reflect their passion for detail. The walls of our bedroom were hung with 18th-century tapestries, mirrors by Thomas Chippendale and a collection of Irish art from the 18th century to the present.

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with gremolata (a condiment of lemon zest, garlic, parsley and olive oil) and a casserole of lamb cooked with potatoes and black truffles. We left the hotel with every intention of returning soon to take cooking lessons and to go truffle-hunting.

Amanruya

*Turkey — Bodrum is the primary resort town and yachting center on the Aegean coast of Turkey and lies a 75-minute flight south of Istanbul. In December 2011, Amanruya opened on the northern coast of the Bodrum Peninsula, 10 minutes’ drive from the center of town.*

Sited on a hillside amid an ancient olive grove, the property is constructed on several levels, with plazas and walkways that echo the layout of regional villages. Clad in local stone, the 36 pool cottages are the essence of elegant simplicity. Spacious and high-ceilinged, they are awash with light. French doors open onto irresistible gardens with pergola-shaded daybeds and blue-green private pools.

Amanruya does not have a dining room as such, but a series of open terraces and pavilions clustered around the main pool. Menus combine the Turkish kitchen with Aman’s Asian heritage.

Other amenities include two spa suites and a gymnasium, and there are numerous water-sport options at the Beach Club. Each evening, as sunset approached, we mounted the steps in the library tower to gaze out across the Aegean. It was then that we fully appreciated the essence of Amanruya. It is a self-contained world of deep tranquility; a place to be healed and restored.

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**Amanruya**

**Restaurants of the Year**

**UNITED STATES (informal)**

**BOULEVARD** *San Francisco* — On a recent trip to San Francisco, I decided to revisit Boulevard. I have long admired the culinary vision of Nancy Oakes, who teamed up with noted designer Pat Kuleto to open the restaurant in 1993. Belle Epoque flair and a first-class staff complement the invariably excellent food.

My starter of thinly sliced ahi tuna with gribiche, a mixture of eggs and vegetables, was so fresh and vibrant as ever. The main course was porcini-stuffed grilled veal chop that was cooked to perfection, and the equally imaginative Berkshire pork prime rib chop came with dumplings of sauerkraut and bacon, turnips with a cider glaze, apple crème fraîche, and a dressing of pork jus with sage.

Twenty years on, Boulevard is as fresh and vibrant as ever. 155 WEST 51ST STREET. TEL. (212) 554-1515. LE-BERNARDIN.COM

**INTERNATIONAL (informal)**

**GASTROLOGIK** *Stockholm* — A new generation of Swedish chefs is emerging, and the best place to experience their work is at recently opened Gastrologik. This is the creation of Anton Bjuhr, a baker, and Jacob Holmström, formerly executive chef at the two Michelin-starred Mathias Dahlgren restaurants in Stockholm. The daily tasting menu is a suite of surprises. This is seen in dishes such as squid-ink tagliolini with herring caviar, veal bone marrow and shallots; and deboned pig’s trotter with cep mushrooms, celeriac and green peppercorns display the chef’s remarkable imagination.

TORHOUTSEESTENWEG 479. TEL. (32) 50-67-34-46. HERTOG-JAN.COM

**Chef of the Year**

**JOHN BESH** *New Orleans* — For years, I’ve recommended chef John Besh’s flagship restaurant, the ever-imaginative August. But his culinary empire continues to expand, and I’d wondered whether its high standards would carry over into his newest ventures.

On a recent visit to the Crescent City, any doubts were quickly laid to rest. Chic Italian/Creole Domenica delighted me with well-balanced dishes such as squid-ink tagliolini with blue crab, and redfish with peach salad and brown butter zabaglione. It seemed less likely that the 1940s-themed American Sector in the National WWII Museum would rise to the same heights, but the blue crab and sausage stew was perhaps the most delicious dish of my trip.
Abu Camp

Botswana — Over the past 20 years, Abu Camp has acquired a reputation as the preeminent place to ride on African elephants. Now partly owned by Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, Abu reopened in April 2011, having been completely rebuilt and refurbished.

Set on a 500,000-acre private concession in Botswana’s Okavango Delta, it has just six accommodations. Overlooking a tranquil lagoon and shaded by hardwood trees, the suites are idiosyncratic canvas-and-beam structures that are part tent, part cabin. They are not air-conditioned, but are effectively cooled by ceiling fans. Bleached wooden floors covered by sisal matting, wicker screens, four-poster king-size beds, wingback armchairs, large writing desks, framed black-and-white photography and traditional African sculptures all help to create an exceptionally elegant and relaxing environment. Huge baths provide walk-in showers, twin basins set in black marble, and electric lighting. Glass doors open onto decks with soaking tubs. Although the suites at Abu do not have plunge pools, they do offer attractive sundecks with loungers.

The lavish public areas are contemporary African in style and include a tranquil library and an adjoining communications center. Uniquely for African in style and include a tranquil library and an adjoining communications center. Uniquely for African in style and include a tranquil library and an adjoining communications center. Uniquely for African history and wildlife. One entire side of the expansive living areas connected by two waterways, the Savuti Channel and the Selinda Spillway. Selinda is part of an immense and pristine wilderness area that offers, arguably, the greatest wildlife-viewing on earth.

Of course, wildlife sightings are never guaranteed, but on our recent trip we were in luck. The animal that still gives me the greatest thrill is the leopard, partly because it is so beautiful, and partly because it is extremely shy and elusive. With the exception of a few places (such as Sabi Sand Reserve in northeast South Africa) where they have become habituated to safari vehicles, leopard are generally spotted in the roving beam of a spotlight at night. Having left Zarafa Camp just after sunrise, however, we were lucky enough to find a mother and a handsome full-grown cub strolling at the edge of the Selinda Spillway in broad daylight. For some reason, they were completely unfazed by our presence, and we were able to follow them, sometimes to within 30 feet, for nearly half-an-hour. It was the finest leopard sighting that I have enjoyed over dozens of African safaris spanning more than three decades.

Best Wildlife Experience

Botswana’s Selinda Reserve enjoys a unique location, being virtually equidistant from the Okavango Delta, Linyanti Swamp and Savuti Marsh, three legendary wildlife areas connected by two waterways, the Savuti Channel and the Selinda Spillway. Selinda is part of an immense and pristine wilderness area that offers, arguably, the greatest wildlife-viewing on earth.

Zarafa Camp

Botswana — Set on a 320,000-acre private concession in Botswana’s Selinda Reserve, Zarafa Camp overlooks a two-mile-long lagoon teeming with crocodiles and hippos and home to impressive herds of elephant. The camp opened in 2008 and is the brainchild of celebrated filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert. Drawing on decades of experience, they decided to create the perfect safari camp in an ideal location.

The guest lodgings comprise just four magnificent 1,000-square-foot tented suites, each with a private plunge pool. The interiors are divided into three “rooms.” Large living areas come with leather sofas and armchairs, polished wooden floors, Oriental carpets, antique chests and old-fashioned writing desks. Beyond a canvas screen, equally expansive bedrooms feature king-size beds draped with mosquito netting, and gas fireplaces with burnished copper chimneys. Beyond that, baths provide copper-clad tubs and effective indoor showers. The suites have electric lighting, but are not air-conditioned. Overall, they offer exceptional levels of privacy, comfort and style.

The camp’s spacious and atmospheric living and dining areas are housed beneath a steep, coffee-colored canvas roof and are decorated in a French neocolonial style with dark woods, polished leather, framed maps and shelves of hardback books on African history and wildlife. One entire side of the structure opens onto a huge deck that commands a spellbinding view of the lagoon. Meals are mostly taken outside and the standard of the cooking is, in the circumstances, extraordinary. Selinda offers exceptional year-round game-viewing. The local
proud numbers 15 lion, but it has a large territory, and a sighting is not guaranteed. A pack of rare wild dog can frequently be tracked down, however, and leopard sightings are relatively common.

Zarafa is an idyllic camp, with delicious food and superior service. And with a maximum of eight guests, it provides a unique and semi-private safari experience.

TENTED SUITE, FROM $2,298 FOR TWO (ALL MEALS, HOUSE BEVERAGES, SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES AND PARK FEES INCLUDED). TEL. (27) 11-807-3800. WILDERNESS-SAFARIS.COM

### Jack’s Camp

**Botsswana —** An hour by light aircraft southeast of the desert outpost of Maun, the vast Makgadikgadi salt pans cover an area larger than Switzerland. Jack’s Camp is located on a low island at the edge of the pans. It is a place of silence and emptiness, overseen by the immense and cloudless Kalahari sky.

Jack’s was founded by the adventurer and filmmaker Ralph Bousfield in memory of his father, a larger-than-life pioneer. The enormous main living and dining tent reflects the men’s shared passion for Africa’s most elemental places. A stuffed lion in a glass case stands guard over a treasure trove of animal skulls, fossils, eggs, spears, arrows, hundreds of books and maps, 19th-century etchings, and framed posters for exhibitions by the artist and photographer Peter Beard. Down the center of the tent, a dining table seats 20 in comfort, and looks as though it might originally have been intended for army officers on some far-flung Victorian campaign. The 10 guest tents share the same nostalgic décor, with four-poster beds, writing desks, antique furniture, brass-bound chests and bookshelves crammed to capacity. However, they are also extremely comfortable, with large electric fans, ensuite baths, effective indoor and outdoor showers, and spacious verandas.

A splendid swimming pool is shaded from the desert sun by a flamboyant cotton canopy. Close by, a waterhole has been dug, which, along with elephant, zebra and wildebeest, occasionally attracts a wandering pride of lion. Jack’s Camp is an extremely well-organized place that also offers delicious cuisine. For those of a romantic and adventurous spirit, it cannot be recommended too highly.

TENTED ACCOMMODATION, FROM $2,550 FOR TWO (ALL MEALS AND SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES INCLUDED). TEL. (27) 11-447-1605. UNCHARTEDAFRICA.COM

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### Conservation Project of the Year

**Located 135 miles northwest of Johannesburg, Madikwe Game Reserve is close to South Africa’s border with Botswana.**

Back in 1991, the government decided that the most appropriate use for this 185,000-acre tract of arid bushveld would be wildlife conservation. The existing cattle farms had not prospered, and their owners were happy to accept financial compensation. Twenty years later, Madikwe is South Africa’s fifth-largest game reserve, enclosed by a 95-mile perimeter fence and home to 66 mammal species, including lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant and wild dog. Operation Phoenix, which concluded in 1997, was the largest wildlife translocation exercise the world has yet seen.

One evening, as the heat began to drain out of the sun, we set off on a game drive from Mateya Safari Lodge. In places beside the red dirt road, it was still possible to see the ghostly outlines of former farm buildings. Soon, however, all signs of human habitation had disappeared, and we were entirely enclosed by the sights and sounds of the wild. Turning a corner, we were abruptly confronted by a pack of wild dog. Its 20 or so members socializing, grooming and lying semi-concealed in the dry grass, awaiting twilight and the beginning of the nightly hunt. Today, there are fewer than 5,000 wild dog in the whole of Africa. But thanks to determined conservation efforts at Madikwe and places like it, maybe the species still has an outside chance to survive.

**Mateya Safari Lodge**

**South Africa —** Susan White Mathis, a native of Atlanta, had long been in search of a place to build an African retreat, and after an extensive search, she settled on Madikwe Game Reserve, a 185,000-acre tract of arid bushveld located an hour by light aircraft northwest of Johannesburg. Enclosed by a 95-mile fence, it is home to 66 mammal species, including lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant and wild dog. After a while, however, it became clear that the home she had constructed for herself and her friends could also function as a small, ultra-luxurious game lodge.

Set around a rocky outcrop, Mateya Safari Lodge comprises just five huge air-conditioned suites. These are astonishingly opulent, with four-poster beds, large fireplaces and artwork ranging from tribal sculptures to contemporary African landscape paintings. The marble baths feature soaking tubs positioned to allow a view of passing wildlife, and interconnecting indoor and outdoor showers. From a sun lounger on your private rosewood deck, all you can see is a stretch of tawny grassland extending beyond your infinity-edge pool to a ridge of distant hills.

Public areas at Mateya are equally lavish and include an exceptional library, plus an expansive living area that provides a gallery-like space for White Mathis’ vast collection of African sculpture. A formal dining room is complemented by a wonderful outdoor deck with a view of a waterhole, plus a private dining area in the 8,000-bottle wine cellar. During our stay, the food was uniformly delicious and the service prompt and exceptionally obliging. Facilities at Mateya include a small spa. The wildlife-viewing is well-organized and the game prolific.

SUITE, FROM $1,865 FOR TWO (ALL MEALS, LOCAL BEVERAGES, GAME DRIVES AND PARK FEES INCLUDED). MADIKWE RESERVE, MOLATEDI, NORTH WEST PROVINCE. TEL. (27) 14-778-9200. MATEYASAFARI.COM

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Taj Falaknuma Palace

India — India’s palace hotels are living links to the era of the maharajas, the 200 years prior to independence when semi-autonomous princes ruled much of the country. The newly restored Taj Falaknuma Palace in Hyderabad is now perhaps the most opulent palace hotel of all.

Not only was Hyderabad the largest of the princely states, it was also the wealthiest. When he was deposed in 1948, the last Nizam was adjudged the richest man in the world. Set on a 32-acre estate, the palace was designed in 1894 by a British architect, William Ward Marret, who employed an idiosyncratic combination of styles to create an immense structure that was intended to rival the palaces of European royalty. Escorted to our room by an elegant receptionist, we passed through a library lined with teak and rosewood bookshelves and furnished with a table inlaid with marquetry of breathtaking intricacy and skill. The whole room, our guide informed us, was a replica of one at Windsor Castle in England.

The palace has been converted to contain 60 rooms and suites on an ascending scale of splendor. Our Historical Suite was spacious and comfortable. The prolonged restoration has resulted in quiet and effective air-conditioning, and the bath provided an idiosyncratic combination of styles to create an immense structure that was intended to rival the palaces of European royalty. Escorted to our room by an elegant receptionist, we passed through a library lined with teak and rosewood bookshelves and furnished with a table inlaid with marquetry of breathtaking intricacy and skill. The whole room, our guide informed us, was a replica of one at Windsor Castle in England.

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The Falaknuma Palace has two principal restaurants: Celeste, serving European dishes; and Adaa for Indian cuisine, in particular Hyderabad specialties prepared in the so-called dum, or slow-cooked, style. Throughout our stay, the food was delicious and was served by polished and attentive staff. At lunchtime, we tended to opt for a simple salad in the Rotunda next to the swimming pool. There is also a spa offering a variety of traditional Indian therapies. The Taj Falaknuma is a self-contained world, and for a day or so, it is hard to find any incentive to leave.

Best Spa

Returning to Amantaka after a hot afternoon of sightseeing in the lovely Laotian city of Luang Prabang, it was a relief to slip into the cool, serene, votive candle-lit spa for the signature treatment. Four contrasting massage oils were followed by a blissful body wrap, during which I was slathered with lemon-grass and white clay and swathed in white cotton. It was perhaps the most enjoyable spa treatment I've ever had.

Best Pool

Located in Galle, Sri Lanka, Amangalla occupies a 1684 building, which once housed the colonial New Oriental Hotel; after a complete refurbishment, it opened as an Amanresort in 2005. Today, the Zaal (Great Hall) remains accessible to the public, and the restaurant and adjoining veranda are integral to the social life of the town. Beyond the reception, however, is an idyllic walled garden reserved for hotel guests. Its centerpiece is an exquisite 70-foot jade-green swimming pool, beside which pristine white loungers are partially shaded by swaying palm fronds. It is an ineffably peaceful spot in which to read and to dream.

Best Beach

The Siam is located in the historic Dusit district, near many of the city’s most famous attractions, including Wat Pho and the Grand Palace. Occupying three acres of landscaped riverfront, the property is centered on the Main Residence, containing an impressive atrium with full-size palms, giant ferns and an elevated black granite fountain. Overall, the interior combines the style of the King Rama V period, 1853-1910, with elements of art deco.

On our arrival, our butler led us to our Pool Villa Courtyard suite. It proved to be a stunningly beautiful little complex containing a stylish living room and a cleverly designed bedroom with a huge stall shower. Outside, a large plunge pool was set in a private interior terrace surrounded by lush tropical greenery.

Three century-old Thai teakwood houses now serve as a bar, cooking school and restaurant. The outstanding Chon Thai Restaurant serves utterly delicious local cuisine. Other amenities include a 70-foot infinity pool overlooking the river, and a fine spa.

For such a new property, the service at The Siam is extremely impressive. Overall, it is a hotel that caters to the needs and tastes of the discriminating individual traveler.
Six Senses Con Dao

Vietnam — The Con Dao Islands, an archipelago of lush mountain ridges and wave-scalloped beaches, lie 150 miles south of Ho Chi Minh City. Once the site of a notorious prison, the archipelago is now two-thirds national park.

Six Senses Con Dao opened on the island of Con Son in December 2010. The architecture of the main public buildings employs the idioms of a Vietnamese fishing village, with a “market square” and chophouses of salt-stained gray wood. The resort comprises 50 villas with private plunge pools. Our Ocean Front Villa was compact but charming, with big picture windows facing the sea. Amenities included a wine fridge and a Bose sound system. The bath area was nearly as large as the bedroom/living room, with a terrazzo soaking tub, two sinks and a daybed. A small, enclosed courtyard garden provided an outdoor shower. (The three- and four-bedroom villas come with lap pools as well as plunge pools, and would be superb for family holidays.)

As with all Six Senses properties, Con Dao has a magnificent spa. But what really distinguishes this resort is the quality of its food. Lunch is served beside the sizeable freshwater pool, or better, at the outstanding open-air Vietnamese restaurant. There, we feasted on irresistible nem (fried spring rolls), soups, and, my favorite, crispy Saigon omelets filled with bean sprouts, shrimp and fresh herbs. A comfortable room, a glorious beach and delicious food all left us disinclined to venture out. Six Senses Con Dao is an outstanding beach resort that is not only an ideal place to unwind at the end of an Asian trip, but a worthy long-haul destination in itself.

Hotel Manager of the Year

JASON FRIEDMAN The Siam, Bangkok — For decades, one of the pleasures of arrival in Bangkok was being greeted in the lobby of The Oriental (now the Mandarin Oriental) by Kurt Wachtveitl, the greatest of the old-school GMs. Before he retired in 2009, Kurt was the public face of his hotel, your effortlessly charming host, not just a faceless administrator. I am pleased to say that the Thai capital now has a new high-profile general manager. Jason Friedman was on hand to greet me the moment I arrived at The Siam, the delightful new boutique hotel beside Bangkok’s Chao Phraya River. During my stay, I was continuously impressed by his warmth, attention to detail and professionalism. A graduate of the Cornell University hotel school, this sophisticated young New Yorker has worked extensively in Southeast Asia — at Amandari, among other hotels — and he takes a laudably hands-on approach to creating a personalized experience for his guests.

Concierge of the Year

FRANK MARANDINO The Rittenhouse Hotel, Philadelphia — While I was planning my trip to Philadelphia, concierge Frank Marandino offered invaluable advice about restaurants and sightseeing in the city, and when he overheard us checking in at the front desk, he greeted us as old friends. With 98 rooms, The Rittenhouse isn’t an especially small hotel, but Marandino never failed to remember our names, engaging us in conversation whenever he had the chance. Indeed, he personified the wonderfully warm, personal service of The Rittenhouse, where every staff member seemed determined that we should want for nothing.

Sommelier of the Year

DAVID LYNCH San Francisco — I first encountered David Lynch when he worked with Joe Bastianich and Mario Batali at Babbo in New York. From Manhattan, he headed across the country to Quince in San Francisco. Now, he has just opened St. Vincent, a wine-centric tavern on Valencia Street in the city’s Mission District. There, the list features 100 wines for under $100. Lynch is also a fine writer, and is author (along with Bastianich) of the authoritative “Vino Italiano: The Regional Wines of Italy.” To be in the hands of David Lynch is to embark on a magical journey of wine discovery.

Hospitality Award

SIMON O’HARA Coopershill, County Sligo, Ireland — Although Coopershill is not at the pinnacle of luxury, it embodies the spirit of Irish hospitality at its best. Presiding over the Georgian house that his family has owned since 1774, Simon O’Hara could not be more gracious and helpful. During our recent trip, he was to be found at breakfast each morning, helping to serve the wonderful dishes of eggs and Irish meats, and always ready with insightful tips and touring suggestions (for which he would later provide annotated maps). In the evening, he hosted the cocktail hour with consummate charm and then transferred to the dining room, where, in turn, he engaged each table in fluent and solicitous conversation.

Lifetime Achievement Award

KERMIT LYNCH Wine Importer — Berkeley wine retailer and importer Kermit Lynch celebrated his 40th year in business last year. I wish him another 40 (at least!). The author of a lively monthly newsletter, as well as the contemporary classic “Adventures on the Wine Route,” Lynch spends half his year in the southern Rhône Valley, where he co-owns a vineyard in Gigondas. His imports are available all over the country, but during your next trip to San Francisco, I heartily recommend a visit to his pleasant and unassuming brick retail shop in Berkeley.
Indelible Memories

Travel is often exhilarating and intoxicating, but it also bequeaths a fund of memories that is a lifelong source of solace and delight. Here are six trip highlights from 2012 that will forever inspire interludes of fireside reverie.

A Drive Around Rosguill Peninsula

While staying in the lovely 18th-century Rathmullan House in northern Donegal, we meandered along the nearby nine-mile “Atlantic Drive” around the famously scenic Rosguill Peninsula. Each bend in the road presented a vista that invited a photograph: windblown fields dotted with whitewashed cottages; rugged, rock-bordered bays; beaches of golden sand scoured by unrelenting surf; and restless expanses of ocean, reflecting the Wedgwood blue of the sky.

Lunch on the Atacama Salt Flats

Staff at Awasi in northern Chile assured us that the one sight we would not want to miss during our stay was the vast Tara Salt Flat. A daylong excursion took us through tracts of red desert overlooked by snowcapped mountains. The flats themselves are dotted with turquoise oases — sprinkled with pink flamingoes — and towering, wind-sculpted rock “cathedrals.” It was amid this scene of unearthly beauty that our guide set up a table, spread out a red-checked tablecloth and served a picnic lunch of smoked salmon, roast beef, potato salad and cookies.

Hiking in the Napa Valley

Calistoga Ranch in the Napa Valley is sequestered at the base of a canyon filled with shady stands of moss-covered live oaks. Two trailheads on the property climb to opposing ridges; both switchback through low-lying coastal redwood trees to peaceful copes of twisted, red-barked manzanita. One morning, I opted for a hike instead of the treadmill, and from a lookout point on a Palisades ridge, I watched the mist flow down the Mayacamas range across the valley.

An Encounter in Vientiane

Wandering down a side street in Vientiane on a hot, sleepy afternoon, we were surprised to see a tidy wooden sign hung out front of a handsome French Colonial villa: “Lao Textiles.” Curious, we stepped inside and promptly found ourselves in a shop filled with an array of hand-woven Laotian textiles. The smiles of the women working at their looms in the villa’s peaceful garden returned to us every time we wear the beautiful silk scarves that we purchased.

Keeping Lookout With the Meerkats

While sipping a glass of chilled lemonade overlooking the sun-seared plains of the Kalahari, our guide, Super, proposed a late-afternoon visit to the meerkats. The occupants of the nearby colony, he explained, had become habituated to human visitors. Meerkats are small mammals belonging to the mongoose family, which characteristically use their long tails to stand upright to spot predators. After a short drive from Jack’s Camp, we came to their network of burrows and sat down to await their return. Within minutes, around 20 of the creatures had arrived, squeaking excitedly. Being in constant danger of attack, meerkat groups appoint sentries, who seek out the highest vantage point from which to keep watch. To my amazement, one meerkat identified an ideal observation tower and promptly ran up my arm to stand on the top of my head, where it remained for close to five minutes.

A Tranquil Evening in Kandy

The pretty town of Kandy is surrounded by tea plantations whose dark-green bushes quilt the slopes of the nearby hills. Kandy occupies a unique place in Sri Lankan culture because of the Temple of the Tooth, a shrine said to house one of the Buddha’s teeth. As well as being an object of religious veneration, the tooth is a powerful symbol of Sinhalese nationalism. Which is why, in January 1998, Hindu Tamil Tiger terrorists detonated an 800-pound truck bomb outside, killing 16 people, including a 2-year-old child. The Sri Lankan civil war ended in May 2009, and Kandy is returning to normal. Every day, the elaborate casket containing the tooth is displayed to throngs of worshippers. On the evening we visited the temple, the atmosphere was calm and benign. Saffron-robed monks mingled with the sizeable crowd, among which were dozens of parents with their children. A wound was perceptibly beginning to heal, and I dared to hope that the next generation would not inherit the ancient quarrel.

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Looking Ahead

This month sees the first issue of a redesigned Hideaway Report. Over the past 34 years, the newsletter has undergone numerous subtle modifications. On this occasion, I decided to be a little bolder. Aside from the white paper, which I hope gives the publication a more contemporary feel, the new layout permits me to include many more brief stories. These will, I trust, enable me to provide a range of content that reflects the richness and variety of my travels. During 2013, you will receive three color supplements to the Hideaway Report, dedicated to golf, wine and fly-fishing. Again, my ambition is to bring you greater breadth of subject matter. And I also wish to share discriminating information about three of my personal passions. I am thrilled that in the past year the digital version of the Hideaway Report, with color photos and video, has proved such an unqualified success. Now, a new iPad-friendly version can be downloaded from iTunes by subscribers, free of charge.