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ANDREW HARPER'S Hideaway Report®

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

Touring the Unspoiled Northwest of Ireland



RECENTLY, WE VISITED A part of Ireland that we have scarcely touched before: the wildly beautiful northwest. It proved to be a region of rugged mountains, wind-swept moorlands and

dramatic sea cliffs, with Atlantic swells breaking on vast golden beaches. As sectarian conflict seems to be receding into history, we also took the opportunity to cross over into Northern Ireland.

I particularly enjoyed the variety of lodgings we found, from intimate country house hotels to a grand castle and a once-derelict mansion that has been spectacularly restored. As on our last visit, the food was excellent, with talented chefs taking full advantage of pasture-raised lamb and beef, superb seafood, and vegetables untouched by chemical sprays. And in addition to the pleasure of

sightseeing and hiking, we found time to play some of the region's wonderful golf courses.

Alas, Ireland is a very different country from the one I last encountered in the spring of 2008. Before that year was out, the Celtic Tiger had fallen victim to a bursting real estate bubble and overextended banks. The effects have been tough, with unemployment at more than 14 percent. Still, as travelers, we enjoyed many of the benefits of the boom years, most notably the excellent roads that now make getting around so easy. (Don't worry; there is still no shortage of picturesque country lanes.)

Arriving in Dublin, we picked up our car and set out along a major highway much like those at home. But before long, it took us to less harried byways and peaceful scenery. We headed into the country's Midlands region, a place of neat towns and rolling fields filled with grazing sheep and horses. In the town of Mountrath, County Laois, 60 miles southwest of the capital, we found ourselves tracing a stone wall that marked the perimeter of a great estate. Having announced ourselves at imposing iron gates via an intercom, we followed a meandering road through fields and past a time-honored church to the front of **BALLYFIN**, perhaps the finest Regency house in all of Ireland. There, awaiting us, was a row of five members of the staff, providing a scene to stir the souls of Downton devotees.

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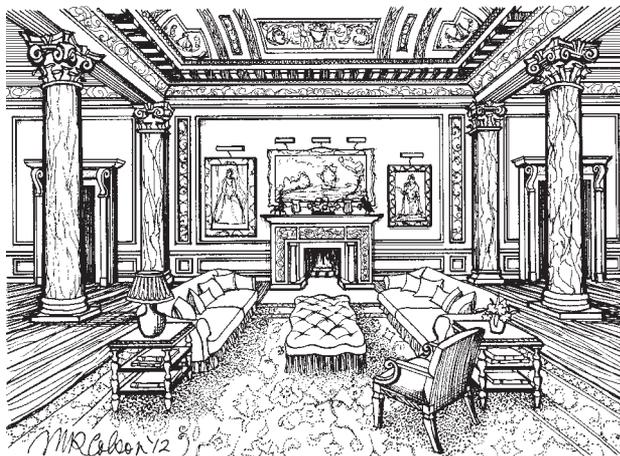
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In the front hall, we found an antique mosaic brought from Italy during the house's construction in 1822. This served as prelude to the magnificent public rooms, each with its own startling architectural riches. Time and again, we found ourselves gazing at the incredibly detailed plasterwork, attempting to trace its intricate motifs highlighted with hand-applied gilt. Throughout the mansion, the columns are embellished with *scagliola*, a



The Saloon, Ballyfin

trompe l'oeil art that requires a mix of plaster and various dyes, which is then painted and polished, a process far more costly than actual marble. The parquet floors are among the finest we have ever seen, while sumptuous fabrics and rugs are complemented by fine mahogany furniture, French chandeliers, mirrors by Thomas Chippendale and a collection of Irish art from the 18th century to the present.

This grandeur exists today thanks to the unstinting dedication of American businessman Fred Krehbiel and his Irish wife, Kay. The couple had long been in search of a fading country house to restore as a top-flight hotel and chanced upon Ballyfin in 2002. Originally built by the Coote family and designed by the celebrated architects Sir Richard and William Morrison, the house was sold to the Patrician Brothers in the 1920s, when the emerging movement for Irish independence made it prudent for large Protestant landowners to leave. The Brothers, a teaching order, turned the home into a school, helping to keep its rooms in relatively good repair. But eventually, the school declined and the deterioration accelerated in the early 21st century.

Sparing no expense, the Krehbiels completely restored the house, a Herculean effort that took almost nine years. Today, the 15 guest rooms reflect their passion for detail. The walls of our bedroom were hung with 17th-century Flemish tapestries, yet despite the grandeur, we felt cloistered in a cozy private world.

We soon fell into the seductive rhythm of country house life: large breakfasts over which we lingered with *The Irish Times*, followed by walks on the 614-acre property — especially around the lake to the walled garden where much of the produce for the kitchen is grown, and a hike up to an old tower from which seven counties are visible on a clear day. Otherwise, we swam in the pretty indoor pool or sat reading in leisurely anticipation of afternoon tea.

Under the direction of Fred Cordonnier, who has worked in Michelin-starred restaurants throughout Europe, including *Patrick Guilbaud* in Dublin, Ballyfin's kitchen turns out reliably exceptional cuisine. Although everything that we tried was excellent, I would particularly cite the West Cork diver scallops with eel, peas and wild garlic; and the beef filet accompanied by oxtail, morels and veal sweetbreads. With a view of an illuminated cascade, the constant attentions of the aptly named food and beverage director Frederic Poivre, and a delightful wine list — which begins with a selection from Bordeaux châteaux founded by the so-called “Wild Geese,” Irishmen who fled to France in the 17th century — Ballyfin provides a dining experience that few hotels can match.

The staff's effusive greeting at the beginning of our stay served as a foretaste of the friendly and attentive service to come. I particularly recall a whispered inquiry as to whether I would care for tea while reading in the 5,000-volume library; the encyclopedic knowledge of the house and its holdings displayed by the ever-present butler, Declan; and an errant button on my jacket being reattached in little more than five minutes before dinner.

One evening over drinks, a gentleman from Dublin marveled at the resurrection of Ballyfin: “It is truly a great gift to the nation that the Krehbiels have given us.” And a considerable gift to American travelers, as well. **98** *Deluxe Room, \$1,225; State Room, \$1,445; Suite, \$1,760. Ballyfin, County Laois. Tel. (353) 5787-55866. ballyfin.com*

From the soft landscape of the Irish Midlands, we journeyed into the rugged northwest, an area famously beloved by the great poet W.B. Yeats. Just south of Sligo Town, we ventured onto a winding road, crossed the River Unshin via an old stone bridge and came to the impressive Georgian façade of **COOPERSHILL**. Built in 1774, it has been home to eight generations of the O'Hara family, the current occupant being Simon, a young man who is the exemplification of Irish hospitality.

Coopershill cannot be compared to Ballyfin. Rather, it is a house that has long been a family home. The staircase leading to the bedrooms is flanked by testaments to the O'Hara past — armaments, portraits, game trophies —

which give visitors a vivid sense of Coopershill history. Of the eight accommodations, six are on the second floor and two are on the third. They vary in size — “Venetian,” the largest, was the original master bedroom — and are appointed with a pleasing mix of antique furniture. By Simon’s own admission, the baths are in need of updating. I concur, but they are not in disrepair. It is just that they do not meet the most exacting contemporary standards.

The ground-floor public rooms are lovely, with high ceilings and handsome plasterwork. The ever-beckoning drawing room with its blazing fire is a nightly gathering spot, a place for tales of the day exchanged in a congenial spirit fostered by Simon’s tireless hospitality. The dining room is enhanced by polished wood tables set with silver and Irish crystal, the sight of which made me forswear my long-held conviction that wine should only be served in plain stemware! Chef Christina McCauley scours the local producers and markets in pursuit of a “farm-to-fork” menu. The results are exceptional, and I am still nostalgic for her carrot and tarragon soup and one of the best racks of lamb I have ever eaten.

Walks on the property are led by Alice, an ever-obliging cocker spaniel. Other diversions include tennis and croquet. Simon is a font of local information and will loan you maps and provide detailed instructions. Coopershill is not one of Ireland’s grandest houses, but it is one of the most comfortable and welcoming imaginable. **87 Classic Room, \$250; Superior Room, \$275. Riverstown, County Sligo. Tel. (353) 7191-65108. coopershill.com**

From Sligo, we continued farther north into County Donegal, the land gradually taking on a wilder aspect. Considered the most remote of Ireland’s counties, Donegal is a stronghold of traditional culture. Music is still part of everyday life, tweed is still woven by hand, and Gaelic is the first language on all the signposts.

Donegal Town is located an hour’s drive north of Sligo, and there we stayed at the **LOUGH ESKE CASTLE**, tucked into the woods beside a large lake. The castle is an impressive building, recently saved from ruin by Solis, a hotel group that is part of the high-end Capella brand. The 1868 façade has been completely restored and the interior redone in an Edwardian style, with leaded glass windows, overstuffed couches and plush carpets and drapes.

The 96 rooms and suites are divided among the castle itself, converted stables and a new garden wing. Situated directly across from an indoor pool and spa, the Garden Suites are spacious — more than 900 square feet — and come with custom-made dark oak furniture, ample sitting areas in front of gas fireplaces, and large

baths with soaking tubs and separate walk-in showers. Although their style may be bland and contemporary, they are undeniably comfortable.

The short stroll to the castle for dinner was particularly memorable, as the building’s crenellations and tower are dramatically floodlit. The clubby *Gallery Bar* has a list of more than 60 whiskies, while *Cedars Grill* offers a menu dominated by Irish produce, with choices such as the excellent hot smoked salmon with a fennel purée and slivers of glazed beets, and the fine sirloin of Irish beef.

While Lough Eske lacks the warmth and intimacy of a classic country house hotel, with its impressive castle centerpiece and convenient modern rooms it provides an excellent base from which to explore the rugged beauty of Donegal. **89 Deluxe Room, \$260; Junior Suite, \$355; Garden Suite, \$420. Donegal Town, County Donegal. Tel. (353) 7497-25100. solislougheskecastle.com**

Leaving Lough Eske, we pushed deeper into northern Donegal to the Fanad Peninsula. This forms the western shore of Lough Swilly, a glacial fjord that in 1607 provided an escape route for the last Irish chieftains, the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell, who eluded the British in what is memorialized as the “Flight of the Earls.”



Dublin Dining

THE CALIBER OF DUBLIN'S RESTAURANTS HAS increased markedly in recent years, and you need never worry about finding a good meal in Ireland's capital. Except, that is, on Sunday and Monday nights, when most of the city's top establishments are closed. (Even two-star *Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud* at The Merrion hotel is dark, an inconvenience that I forcefully deplored to the concierge.) I cannot tell you why, as no one I've asked has offered a convincing explanation. However, here are three places I recommend that *are* open.

A short walk from the intersection of the main shopping thoroughfares, Grafton and Nassau streets, **PICHET** is a lively spot that gives a modern Irish twist to fare rooted in the French bistro tradition. Chef Stephen Gibson has a knack for taking common ingredients and doing uncommon things with them. For example: a hen's egg, coated, quickly fried just enough to cook the white and part of the yolk, served on fresh asparagus (in season, otherwise, on a disc of black pudding) with frisée and baby leeks in a caper-bacon vinaigrette with mustard aioli. Gibson is particularly good with fish, so look for the sea bream with a tomato confit, white beans, fried calamari and braised fennel. *14/15 Trinity Street. Tel. 677-1060. pichetrestaurant.ie*

I am very fond of **THE WINDING STAIR** for its loft-like situation overlooking the River Liffey. The first floor is occupied by an associated bookshop, which sells a wide range of both new and secondhand books. Upstairs, the restaurant demonstrates an unwavering commitment to the best Irish produce. I particularly recommend this place for an early evening meal. You can't go wrong with the smoked fish plate, a choice that will vary seasonally but which will always come with Dillisk (seaweed) bread, crème fraîche and capers. Equally good is the pork filet wrapped in bacon with potato-thyme dumplings and apple sour cream. *40 Ormond Quay. Tel. 872-7320. winding-stair.com*

You will need careful instructions to get to **ONE PICO**, which is hidden in an out-of-the-way alley near St. Stephen's Green. Chef-owner Eamonn O'Reilly has earned his stellar reputation by creating dishes such as a starter of rich langoustine risotto with peas and sorrel in a truffle bisque. His presentation of lamb is just as satisfying, with perfectly roasted loin and rack, as well as a little pithivier (puff pastry pie) of minced braised shoulder with an artichoke, zucchini and basil purée. This was the best meal of our Dublin stay. *5-6 Molesworth Place, Schoolhouse Lane. Tel. 676-0300. onepico.com*

The earls embarked from the small town of Rathmullan, home to our goal, **RATHMULLAN HOUSE**. Dating from the 1760s, this is an imposing white building with three bays, set amid parkland bordering the sea. In 1961, a young couple, Bob and Robin Wheeler, fell under the house's spell and progressively transformed it into a hotel, adding the distinctive dining pavilion in 1969, an indoor pool and bedroom wing in the 1990s, and a new two-story Regency wing in 2004, bringing the total to 32 rooms.

Our Superior Room charmed us from the start, its most appealing feature being a semicircular window with double doors leading out to a small patio. With an eclectic mix of antiques, a comfortable couch and a gas fireplace, it seemed both elegant and homey. The large bath was equipped with an authentic claw-foot tub and a walk-in shower.

Downstairs, the public rooms embody a lived-in comfort, with worn (but not worn out) couches and chairs, plaster moldings and large fireplaces. The dining room — actually a series of interlocking hexagons with ceilings tented in dark blue cloth — is spectacular. Both the "Classic" and "House" menus are full of enticing dishes made from local ingredients and produce from the hotel's walled garden. I particularly relished the diver scallops from nearby Mulroy Bay, which were served with squid-ink gnocchi in a clam broth; and a pork loin accompanied by black pudding and applesauce.

Aside from the pleasures of strolling through the grounds and along the beach, Rathmullan has its indoor pool, two tennis courts and croquet. The staff can also arrange golf, fishing and horseback riding. **91 Superior Double Room, \$290. Rathmullan, County Donegal. Tel. (353) 7491-58188. rathmullanhouse.com**

With The Troubles apparently consigned to history, it seemed high time to visit Northern Ireland, so we headed east across a wide-open border. The only noticeable changes were the British-style road signs, and speed limits in miles rather than kilometers per hour.

Just north of the town of Maghera in County Londonderry, the village of Upperlands was once home to the Clark family, wealthy linen-makers who lived at **ARDTARA**, a 19th-century manor house hidden down a winding lane on eight idyllic acres. Hearing our car pull up, the indispensable Valerie Ferson appeared at the front door to greet us, and ignoring protestations, gathered up our heaviest luggage before shepherding us into the front hall to register.

Ardara has nine bedrooms, with high ceilings, decorative moldings, antique furniture and working

gas fireplaces. They are charming and comfortable in every way. Baths are tiled in marble and have combined shower/tubs. The most desirable accommodations are the Garden Rooms (#2, #3 and #4) with views over the front lawn. Room #8 has the largest bath, with its own fireplace, while #5 should be avoided, as it has only one window and no view.

Wood paneling and a distinctive frieze make the dining room an exceptionally congenial place for dinner. The tables are placed far enough apart for private conversation,

My favorite room was the atmospheric library, with its huge fireplace and deep couches, where I spent one rainy morning reading contentedly.

and the room has a pleasant buzz. Chef Julian Davidson begins the meal with *amuses bouches*, among which our favorite was the tiny eggs Benedict, made with a quail egg and served in a glass. This was followed by a flavorful ham-hock terrine with pickled carrot jam and a mustard aioli, and a succulent dry-aged sirloin with caramelized onion mashed potatoes and veal jus.

From Ardtara, it is an easy drive to the Giant's Causeway, a remarkable area of about 40,000 hexagonal basalt columns, the result of an ancient volcanic eruption, as well as the picturesque Glens of Antrim (fine hiking country) and the walled city of Londonderry (just plain "Derry" to Irish republicans). Valerie, or the equally engaging Geraldine McKillen, is also happy to arrange golf, as well as tours of The Old Bushmills Distillery. **88 Garden Room, \$190. 8 Gortead Road, Upperlands, County Londonderry. Tel. (44) 28796-44490. ardtara.com**

Heading south back to Dublin, we stopped in County Monaghan to stay at **CASTLE LESLIE ESTATE**. Driving down the main — and only — street in the village of Glaslough, you come to its wrought-iron gates. Pass through, and you enter a world little changed since the 19th century. The Leslies have made this 1,000-acre estate their home since the late 1660s, although the actual castle, a splendid example of baronial architecture, was built in the 1800s. In 1991, it passed from Desmond Leslie to his five children, and his daughter, Samantha, took on the challenge of reviving the estate. Today, it is a thriving business under the governance of a family trust. (Not that I put much stock in such matters, but Paul McCartney chose the

hotel for his wedding to his former wife, Heather Mills. And it reminded me of another favored site for celebrity weddings, Skibo Castle, once Andrew Carnegie's Scottish Highland home.)

Driving up to the castle gives you a fine view of the impressive granite and red stone exterior. The interior, however, will really capture your imagination. The paneled drawing room, with views of the adjacent lake, is filled with photographs and family memorabilia, including Winston Churchill's christening gown. (He was a cousin through marriage.) However, my favorite room was the atmospheric library, with its huge fireplace and deep couches, where I spent one rainy morning reading contentedly.

Many of the 20 guest rooms still contain the personal effects of their former occupants. In consequence, they impart a sense of what life was really like when the castle was a family home. We were in "Seymour's Room," named for the third of Sir John and Leonie Leslie's four sons, who lived at Castle Leslie in the early 20th century. His enduring enthusiasm for chinoiserie is still evident in the bamboo chairs and bamboo embellishments on the armoire. Although the accommodations have enormous character and appeal, the baths are a little old-fashioned. All have massive canoe-like tubs, and some have showers as well, but it pays to ask detailed questions when making a reservation. Rather than staying in the castle itself, you can opt for one of the 29 rooms in the expanded and refurbished Lodge, just a short walk away near the front gate. These rooms contain fully modern baths and are more contemporary in style, with period accents.

The Lodge is also home to the pub-like *Conor's Bar*, a lively gathering spot, as well as the property's main restaurant, *Snaffles*. Oak beams, a handcarved ceiling, polished wooden floors, dark wood wine cabinets and an open kitchen all combine to form a distinctive backdrop for creative Irish cuisine. We particularly enjoyed a rich, creamy risotto with lobster in a Parmesan-brandy sauce, and local pork served two ways — a glazed rib chop and rolled filet — served with a parmentier of sauerkraut, black pudding and potato, all in a tangy cider sauce. Castle Leslie has a fine equestrian center and offers hiking, fishing and clay pigeon shooting, as well as a full menu of spa treatments in the so-called "Victorian Treatment Rooms."

Overall, I found the hotel to be a wonderful mix of architectural splendor and homey authenticity. But next time, I will book one of the four Master Bedrooms in the main castle building. **92 Lodge Classic Bedroom, \$205; Castle Heritage Bedroom, \$250; Castle Master Bedroom, \$300. Glaslough, County Monaghan. Tel. (353) 47-88100. castleleslie.com**

Golf in Northwest Ireland

AS I'VE DISCOVERED ON NUMEROUS TRIPS TO IRELAND, the country offers a glimpse of paradise for golfers. The southwest, for example, has classic links courses such as Ballybunion and Waterville, which have long drawn connoisseurs of the royal and ancient game. And superb layouts such as Portmarnock are within easy driving distance of Dublin's historic pubs and literary haunts. But no region of the Emerald Isle has brought me more golfing pleasure than the remote northwest.

The area offers a wealth of quality courses, routed in and around grassy sand dunes, along tidal estuaries and by the roiling Atlantic. These are quaint and quiet tracks with names such as Carne and Connemara, Enniscrone and Rosses Point, where elevated tee boxes provide sweeping vistas, and greens are tucked into devilish nooks, guarded by gaping pot bunkers. The architects of these and other layouts, such as the revered Old Tom Morris in the late 19th century and the prolific Irishman Eddie Hackett nearly 100 years later, were true minimalists, working with the terrain that nature provided. Their tracks give golfers plenty of challenge and fun, as well as a sense of the game as it was played centuries ago. And the clubs that were formed around them are as unassuming as they are congenial, places where bankers and bakers, farmers and financiers gather to enjoy the sport together.

What all this means is that golf in Ireland's northwest is a true throwback. But there are other ways in which time has stood still. Visitors sense this as they drive narrow country lanes bordered by mossy stone walls and green leas in which black-faced sheep and Black Angus cattle graze peacefully. They see it in the sleepy farming and fishing villages that dot the shoreline, with names such as Narin and Portnoo. And they absorb it in the cozy pubs that serve pints of Guinness and Smithwick's and bowls of seafood chowder, as local fiddlers play reels. It is the Ireland of "The Quiet Man," a place so evocative of easier, less hectic times that men and women from the rest of the country head there regularly for respites.

A fine place to begin a golf tour of the region is the **CONNEMARA GOLF LINKS**, a bit west of Galway and just down the road from castle ruins at Ballyconneely. Hackett built the oceanside links on the end of a treeless peninsula some 40 years ago. Due north is **CARNE**. Also laid out by Hackett, it is bordered by farmland on one side and Blacksod Bay on the other. The course's signature features are the monstrous dunes that tower 200 feet in some places. These offer panoramas as breathtaking as the hills a golfer has to climb. And there are also some

of the most dramatic tee boxes a player will ever see. It's golf at its most fun — and also its most aerobic!

Nearby is marvelous **ENNISCRONE**, another Hackett creation (with some input by British architect Donald Steel) that takes golfers on an unforgettable ride through the dunes and along the seashore. The sounds of crashing waves and squawking gulls meet their ears along the way, as does the rumble of the ever-present wind. Occasionally, they catch sight of seals bobbing in the estuary that flanks one side of the course, waiting for Atlantic salmon coming in to spawn. Some Irish golfing friends insist that the stretch of holes from No. 12 to No. 16 at Enniscrone is among the best Ireland has to offer, and I cannot disagree.

Another renowned designer from yesteryear, Harry Colt, laid out **ROSSES POINT**, also known as County Sligo. A highlight is the tee for the par-5 fifth. Perched on top

Monstrous dunes tower 200 feet in places. These offer panoramas as breathtaking as the hills a player has to climb. It's golf at its most aerobic!

of a cliff, it gives golfers the sensation that their drives hang in the air for a near eternity. A second exhilarating shot is on the par-3 13th, high atop another dune, the Atlantic Ocean to the right and a spacious green cut on a flat below. It is the sort of serene place where a golfer could happily halt his round on a lazy summer afternoon and park himself for a spell, hitting iron after iron to see just how close to the hole he could get.

A list of must-plays in the northwest has to include **DONEGAL GOLF CLUB**, also known as Murvagh. It boasts brilliant green complexes that force golfers to hit precise approaches. As for the layout at **NARIN & PORTNOO**, it is not only designed with great deftness but also possesses a true sense of the wild, with hares the size of small dogs racing across fairways on occasion. The hills surrounding the course to the east and south are covered with swathes of gorse, brilliant yellow in full spring bloom.

Then there is **ROSAPENNA**, at the very top of Ireland, with its two tracks. One was built in the early 1890s by Old Tom Morris, the Christopher Wren of the golf world, and the other a century later by noted golf writer, designer and raconteur Pat Ruddy. These give players everything they could desire in seaside links and embody the isolated beauty and beguiling ethos that make northwest Ireland such a compelling place.

Calistoga Ranch: A Serene Napa Hideaway

THE SECOND AUBERGE RESORTS PROPERTY in the Napa Valley — the Auberge du Soleil debuted in 1985 — Calistoga Ranch is implausibly constructed on what was once a trailer campground. Rather than undertake an arduous new commercial zoning process, the developers kept the old building codes and drove in a series of modular units. Fortunately, the results are conspicuously different from an RV park!

The resort comprises 48 cedar-clad guest lodges sequestered in a wooded canyon at the northern edge of the Napa Valley, just off the Silverado Trail. (A further 23 fractionally owned residences occupy the southeast section of the property). While a wide swath of activities is available, from hot air ballooning to wine-blending classes, the resort seems primarily intended to host couples who seek to be alone amid idyllic surroundings.

The stone-and-wood guest lodges blend seamlessly with shady stands of moss-covered live oaks. Owing to the original size restrictions, the units are connected by decks that are designed as outdoor living spaces, with fireplaces, comfortable lounge chairs and dining tables. In the one- and two-bedroom lodges, for example, guests must walk across the decks to go between the bedrooms and the living rooms. On a recent cool spring evening in a Bay Forest Lodge, I found this to be quite refreshing and agreeable, but then, I didn't have to do it in a gale! All of the lodges have outdoor shower areas, their screens draped with hanging wildflowers.

There are no grand public spaces at Calistoga Ranch. Visitors can stroll or be shuttled in golf carts between a pool area and private Cabernet vineyard at one end of the property and a lakeview restaurant and spa at the other. Other guest sightings are scarce.

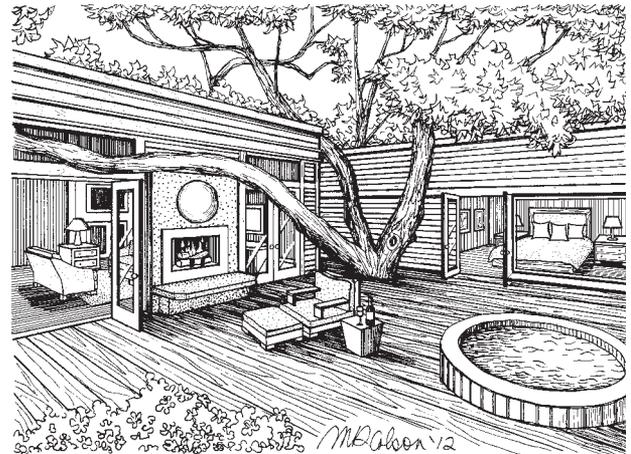
Calistoga is famously a spa destination; its natural hot springs have been popular since the Gold Rush days, and the town's name is a conflation of California and Saratoga Springs (of which it was intended to be a Western imitation). The small spa complex at the resort has a natural mineral pool, an outdoor Jacuzzi and a fetching outdoor relaxation area.

The Lakehouse, under the direction chef Christian Ojeda (formerly at *Fleur de Lys*, and *Joël Robuchon* in Las Vegas), has a superb three-course dinner tasting menu. A bright, citrusy starter of roasted golden beets was followed

by creamy ricotta and yam agnolotti and a perfectly roasted Niman Ranch pork tenderloin enlivened with an aromatic mole sauce. (Room service meals were also of restaurant quality.)

There is a gym by the pool, stocked with all the latest cardio machines, but I skipped it in favor of a hike. Two trailheads on the property climb to opposing ridges; both switchback through low-lying coastal redwood trees to peaceful copses of twisted, red-barked manzanita. From a lookout point on a Palisades ridge, you can watch the morning mist tumble down the Mayacamas range across the valley.

Wine-tasting excursions from Calistoga Ranch are enhanced by the property's a small, gleaming fleet of late-model Mercedes-Benz automobiles, which are available



One-bedroom Oak Creek Lodge with spa, Calistoga Ranch

for guests to use at their discretion. One late afternoon, I found myself zipping along the Silverado Trail in an S350 convertible with the top down, a concierge-annotated winery map at my side.

Calistoga Ranch is priced between its sister properties Auberge du Soleil and Solage. Given that it is not inexpensive, I was slightly underwhelmed by the interior décor, which was functional and rather bland. And the individual rooms are somewhat small, owing to the zoning restrictions. I was also surprised to learn that the spa frowns on guests showing up to use the facilities without any scheduled treatments. These criticisms aside, I commend the resort for its flawless service, excellent food and ineffably tranquil setting. **92 One Bedroom Bay Forest Lodge, from \$895; Two Bedroom Meadow Lodge, from \$2,100. 580 Lommel Road, Calistoga. Tel. (707) 254-2800. calistogaranh.com**

Summer Reading

I have long thought that one of the most important truisms about travel is that the more you read about a place in advance, the more you gain from the experience when you arrive. But even if you have no trip in prospect, armchair travel is a delight. So, if you have some time to spare this summer, here are a few suggestions for your poolside chaise.

SEEKING SICILY

By John Keahey, *Dunne/St. Martin's*

This plunge into the history, culture and cuisine of Sicily came out shortly after my trip there, and reading it inspired an almost irresistible urge to return. Keahey uses great Sicilian writers as an entry point to this enigmatic island. But this is no dry literary exercise; Keahey throws himself into local festivals, consumes countless enviable meals and climbs rickety scaffolding to view the demolition of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's palazzo. When he veers into nostalgia, he changes course soon enough, reminding us that no Sicilian misses the impassable roads and crushing poverty that marred the island's past.

THE STATUES THAT WALKED

By Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo, *Free Press*

Easter Island has fascinated the world for centuries, its giant, enigmatic *moai* standing mute around the coast. Many current theories about the collapse of the Rapa Nui culture suggest that the island was wantonly deforested for slash-

and-burn farming, as well as to provide logs on which to roll giant statues into place. The authors believe that rats, not people, were the most likely cause of the trees' destruction, and that the immense weight of the statues would have crushed any trunks employed to move them. Intriguingly, they discover that there might be some truth to the legend that the massive statues "walked" to their current locations.

YES, CHEF: A MEMOIR

By Marcus Samuelsson, *Random House*

There is no shortage of chef memoirs, but this one (released on June 26) promises to be more entertaining than most. Samuelsson first describes his background in Ethiopia. After the death of his mother, he was adopted by a family in Sweden, where he developed his passion for cooking. His culinary education took him to Switzerland and France, and eventually to New York's famous Scandinavian restaurant *Aquavit*. There, he became the youngest executive chef to be awarded three stars by *The New York Times*. His new Harlem

restaurant, *Red Rooster*, continues to collect accolades, as well as the patronage of President Obama.

CHINA IN TEN WORDS

By Yu Hua, *Pantheon Books*

Relatively unknown in the United States, Yu Hua is one of China's most respected novelists. Nevertheless, he elected not to publish this part memoir, part cultural critique in his homeland. Each of the 10 chapters turns on a single significant word. Yu's first-person accounts of the Cultural Revolution are riveting, but his revelations of present-day corruption are equally compelling. His book provides profound insight into the workings of contemporary China.

JACK 1939

By Francine Mathews, *Riverhead*

This promising spy novel (to be released on July 5) imagines a young Jack Kennedy in Europe, just before the outbreak of World War II. Nazi money has been flowing into the United States as Hitler tries to buy the upcoming election. When President Roosevelt learns that Kennedy, the son of his ambassador to Britain, plans on traveling to Europe to research his senior thesis, he enlists him to follow the money. For those of us who delight in history, European travel and James Bond, this sounds like a uniquely winning combination.

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Reader Survey

THIS MONTH, WE WILL CONDUCT OUR annual survey of members' favorite hotels, with the much-anticipated results to be published in the September *Hideaway Report*. Hoteliers from Antigua to Zambia await your verdicts with bated breath! As in previous years, the survey will be completed online, so expect an email from me shortly. Thank you in advance for your participation.

— Andrew Harper