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NOTES FROM A TRAVEL WRITER'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Worldwide Travel Recommendations for the Sophisticated Traveler

*“For every traveler who has any taste of his own, the only useful guidebook will be
the one he himself has written”*

- Aldous Huxley

Phuket

The most beautiful resort in the world may just be stunning Amanpuri. It sits on Thailand's Phuket Island, gently nudging out into the Andaman Sea. I wish I could have proposed to Angela sitting under a sala , one of the lovely teak pavilions that overlook the beach. Every suite has one, along with a nanny and every creature comfort imaginable, except for lots of other people. Someday, I will propose to her again.

Florida

I have always disliked southern Florida, feeling it has become a sort of New York with palm trees. It lacks all manner of southern charm, has non of the quirky characters once would find in Baton Rouge, or Biloxi, and most of the restaurants do their main business between 4:00-6:00 PM. when the early birders arrive for their nightly feeding. But there is another Florida, out along the Keys. It's called Little Palm Island, and it's just a short launch away, a tiny enclave of civility and comfort. Get a room on stilts and sit in your hammock. When you get tired of that, head out to Little Torch Key or take the snorkeling boat to Looe Key.

Ever take a cruise ship out of Miami? Do you remember passing a private island on the starboard side just before leaving landfall? It's a residential community with a private ferry service and its called Fisher Island. It has one of the finest spas in the U.S., small, private, exclusive. And you can practically see Gloria Estafan's house from the whirlpool bath.

Greek Islands

Don't miss the opportunity and don't buy a tour. Greece should be created to your liking, a necklace of island perfection arranged as jewels belonging only to you. For starters do Symi, Patmos, and tiny Argironisos. Avoid Thira on Santorini but do stay in Oia. Renaissance Cruises is marketing all-year cruises to the Greek islands in mid-winter. The concept might sound appealing but avoid it at all costs. The shops will be closed the weather dreadful. Aim for May pr the last two weeks of April. If that fails, try the last two weeks of September or the first two weeks of October,

France –

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What would happen if a number of the most interesting restaurants in France all got together and agreed to offer a special tasting menu for visitors priced around \$83?

It has happened and you will find the list on the web at www.degriftour.com. Don't bother asking me for the telephone number – they work entirely off the net.

Chicago

Although Charlie Trotter gets the kudos and the credit card commercials, Sarah Stegner, the 31 year-old chef at the Ritz Carlton is receiving raves from industry insiders for her flawless renditions of American regional cooking. It is worth noting that she started working in the Ritz kitchen when she was nineteen.

Paradise

I must be careful about this one. It's my goal to spend a week here, an unfettered island paradise reachable by helicopter or launch from Suva on Fiji. The Wakaya Club is the ultimate getaway. Paradise has an extraordinary chef but no snakes or bugs. Paradise is where Hollywood and the Silicon Valley moguls head when they seek sybaritic solitude. This is the one I want for Christmas; an island where everything is just as good as it can be in an atmosphere of natural and casual elegance. And it's less than \$1000 per day per couple – and that includes the plane ride from Fiji. Certainly not a bargain – but what price for the ultimate memory?

Dominica

One of those still, largely undiscovered islands where those in the know seek out isolated digs with fabulous views and mountains of privacy. One of the best is Petit Coulibri, three gorgeous cottages surrounded by full circular views. The surrounding woods reveal secret gardens with waterfalls and sulfur springs. Think four-poster beds and etched glass windows overlooking the Caribbean from 1,000 up.

Morocco

Accessible and under-visited by Midwesterners, who seem largely unaware of its charm, excellent food, world-class hotels, and affordability, Morocco is exotica under control. The Palais el Jamal is my favorite place to stay. Built in 1879, it sits with the walls of the huge medina at Bab el Guisa. For those who don't care for the idea of staying in a Moorish palace, the Hotel Les Merinides offers more contemporary appointments.

In Marrakesh, there is only one place to stay – the truly venerable La Mamounia. It's seventeen acres of gardens and Art Deco with doors that open to one of the world's great human circuses, a square with everything from snake charmers to jugglers on stilts.

Sophisticated travelers have now heard about Taroudant, home to the best of the souks in Morocco. The Hotel Salam is quieter than offerings closer to the heart of town and is built into the wall of the ancient city. If you want to splurge, you may have to pay \$75 for one of the best rooms.

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There is poverty in Morocco, there is dust, and there are lots of local skills. But this ancient culture offers culinary delights, intriguing shopping opportunities in ancient markets, along with memorable hotels, and high marks on the price/value scale.

St. Lucia

Cruise ship passengers stepping off the gangway in Castries might well wonder what all the fuss is about. To discover the charms of St. Lucia you have to stay a few nights under the gaze of the Piton Mountains. The place to do that is the Jalousie Plantation where the 100 or so cottages come equipped with private plunge pools. There is a great house with a restaurant that combines English service and French island ingenuity. Most of the entrees involve fish caught from waters that lap up against the beach,

This is a place to play backgammon while peering off at the mountain peaks. It is a place where hiking and meandering are always rewarding. This is one of those newfound haunts of the rich and famous that is available to those who are neither. Rates begin under \$500 per night.

Moscow Brunch

Moscow is getting into the Sunday brunch scene, and the current leader of the pack has to be the massive buffet at the Metropol Restaurant. Located in the Metropole Hotel, this Sunday spectacular is priced at just under \$60 per person. Along with everything you would expect – plus caviar, performing magicians, jugglers, and clowns, enliven the atmosphere. That takes some doing in this former command post of the Stalin era.

New Orleans

Those with the means to travel in style know that French tend to vacation in the world's most beautiful locations. They own French Polynesia, they have created the most beautiful islands in the Caribbean, and they do North Africa in style. The people who developed the Loire Valley and Provence know more than the Disney people, about the value of serene sophistication.

So it is wise, I think, to visit America's French city, New Orleans, a visit that can be entirely justified on the basis of cuisine alone. But where to stay?

The historic Soniat House is on Chartres street, right in the heart of the lugubrious French Quarter, But the courtyard garden and the southern hospitality will soon make you forget that you're in a city. Rooms 30 and 33 are best, with skylights and sun. In the morning, you'll be pampered with homemade biscuits and preserves. Then it's only a few hours until you can dine at Emeril's or, for traditionalists, the ultimate New Orleans restaurant, Galatoire's.

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