

Puttin' on the Ritz

by [James Como](#) (November 2018)



Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, Gustav Klimt, 1907

And so we did: celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary for two weeks, first crossing the Atlantic from Red Hook, Brooklyn, on the Queen Mary 2, then enjoying four days in

London, followed by three in Edinburgh. The ship (never a boat: boats don't have ships, but ships have boats) is all it should be. Its design is Art Deco, a personal favorite; painted glass murals and metallic bas reliefs line the wide halls. Fresh flowers abound, as does courtesy. Our suite, with an outside deck, was convenient, well-attended by Jerel, comfortable, and comforting.

The food . . . well, that was uneven, as was the entertainment. (When good it was great, but one blond dancer's best move was the pony tail twirl, and if you want to suggest Cuba you play its music; you don't keep shouting 'ole', which may never have been heard in Cuba.) Lectures were superb. (Did you know the term 'Art Deco' was coined in the sixties?) Restaurant service was abrupt, but our table companions were wonderfully diverse. We usually dine alone, but to view the sea we shared a table with six others: two Texans (elderly mother and middle-aged son), a Welsh couple, and an English couple. The conversation was of good cheer, amusing and edifying (the "Welsh knot"? a horror).

After 6pm the dress code was always 'smart': jacket, sometimes with tie. On gala nights (three) I wore a white dinner jacket and, twice, my tuxedo, always with bow ties. (The politest boy I've ever met asked for instructions: easier to accomplish around one's own neck.) The ballroom orchestra provided the best entertainment (along with a harpist who, to Alexandra's dismay, dressed in tights). On the anniversary proper, August 31st, we dined up there in the Verandah Room in style, the service delightfully perfect. We had steaks and so had to choose our own knives: these for ladies, those for gentlemen. Who knew? Alexandra was resplendent in her golden gown; she had hunted it as though it were a unicorn, and finally it surrendered. She was never more alluring.

Knowing of the anniversary Cunard provided an amenity or two. (I drank my bi-annual quota of champagne.) But, truth be told, we were ready for the end two days earlier than the seven-day crossing actually lasted. (Troop ships, our naval historian Welsh companion informed me, made it in under four, and, by the way, this was a crossing, not a cruise, which requires ports-of-call.) At noon of each of the last five days the clocks jumped to 1pm, so our bodies were not lagging when we arrived at Southampton. Along the way the weather was fine, nothing close to the New York heat wave, but also nothing close to the English weather that greeted us when we arrived for a sabbatical stay in August, 1974: cold and blustery with rain driving sideways. Our arrival at the Savoy found us fresh . . .

We visited Westminster Abbey, where I beheld the new C. S. Lewis plaque in Poets' Corner, a few museums, and Churchill's war rooms, moving beyond words. It's labyrinthine, concrete closeness—the world re-made in miniature—brings home the unrelenting, high-wire tension that prevailed there, for years. At one point an eager guide (all senior-citizen volunteers) brought me by the arm to a door with the words 'Prime Minister' above. "What do you suppose this is?" Seeing a latch I answered, "the great man's private loo." He chuckled. "That's what everyone thought until the end of the war. Look." When he opened the door I beheld a communication room the size of a large phone booth. "Everyday at 2pm he would speak by that phone"—and there it was—"to President Roosevelt." (By the way, how a people who prevailed during that cataclysm, staving off the Reich at such great cost and even greater peril, could now worry over a poolside splash-fight like Brexit is a mystery to me.)

We did some shopping (cashmere this, leather that) and ate supremely well at Simpson's (next to the hotel), a large room out of the thirties. Taxis and car services were prompt and pricey, but you get what you pay for in very heavy traffic: the city is crowded. Alexandra reads the London *Times* daily so was primed for newsy chitchat, but we heard no talk of Brexit, of Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn, of Scotland or Ireland, or of the new duchess. Very business-like, until I watched some TV.

Improv comedy in the U.K. puts ours to shame, but 'reality' TV in the U.K. puts itself to shame, in the form of 'Naked Attraction.' A female host guides a guest through a decision-making process. Which of the three . . . candidates? . . . will the guest choose? Sounds familiar enough, until you see that the three contestants are utterly, unqualifiedly, naked, and that they discuss their best features—as they turn and display—and that the guest is candid about her preferences (I saw only female contestants: the candidates are in all flavors)—all cheery and charming and giggly. And specific. I watched half of one episode. There was moral repugnance, but, I'm semi-ashamed to say, also aesthetic repulsion, as the candidates were almost-almost-universally unappealing, even downright ugly. I suppose part of the point of the show is to overcome body-shaming, and it does, another to titillate, which it does not, a third to *épater les bourgeois*, which one would have thought impossible these days, and it is.

So I say, thank Heaven for the Globe Theater, and for Will, and for *Love's Labour's Lost*, by candlelight, within a faithful rendering of the original theater and with an even more faithful rendering of contemporaneous playing. On a level with the musicians (above and at the back of the thrust stage) we could see and hear close-up the revelry, exquisite comic

timing, oral dexterity, versatility of musical charm, and the acrobatic movement of one of the most precisely performed plays I've ever witnessed. There we were, in the last decade of the sixteenth-century, and I could understand all of this most figure-ridden of Shakespeare's plays.

A sidebar was a day trip by rail to Oxford. There we lunched at The Trout with Walter Hooper, the great man of C. S. Lewis letters and a friend of nearly fifty years. In mid-conversation a peacock strolled in, bent for some bread, looked up, turned, and walked out. Walter and I spent the afternoon at The Eagle and Child, that is, The 'Bird and Baby', under the sign commemorating the Inklings, that group of friends and writers—C. S. Lewis, J. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams, among others—who met regularly at that very spot (and gave rise to *The Lord of the Rings*). A young couple was sitting under the sign, but when I asked them to move for us they did so willingly. They reported that they, being great readers of both Lewis and Tolkien, were there to see that very sign. They were dumbstruck and deeply touched to learn that the man who wrote it—and who knew all the Inklings—was sitting right there.

The next day it was on to Edinburgh, a short flight to a modest airport and a good ride to the Waldorf Astoria Caledonian—not quite the Savoy (what is?), but (as we would hear more than once) “this is Edinburgh.” The whole city is cozy: a castle on high but no skyscrapers and only the very ugly new Scottish parliament building cramping the style: ancient, preserved, navigable, and filled with folk who are proud of it. The hotel is built within what were the walls of a great train station and displays the original clock, still five minutes fast.

The service was uniformly attentive, congenial, and spontaneously engaging, these days reassuringly so. (Full disclosure: some Scottish accents simply confounded me.) Its Peacock Alley (the Waldorf Astoria signature tea room) was both grand *and* unostentatious. On the third night we dined at the Pompadour: very French, except the servers were not condescending. In fact, our head waiter was a Belgian who lived in Quebec and rooted for the Red Sox. (I tipped him well anyway.)

Our walking tour down the Royal Mile was untaxing and, though slim, still pleasurable: the street itself is a museum. We did not make it to the Scottish Story Telling Centre, The People's Story Museum, The Writers' Museum, the Museum of Childhood, or the Camera Oscura and World of Illusions, but we did visit St. Giles cathedral, Adam Smith's grave, and the Palace of Holyroodhouse, where Mary, Queen of Scots, lived. Our rail visit to Stirling Castle, another prominent site of Mary's life and of Scottish history, provided a contrast to the city; it commands the pastoral landscape and once defended all the bridges an invading enemy would use.

The friendliest native was a kilted doorman, Willie, who was smitten by Alexandra (it was mutual). But everyone is friendly; unlike London and New York, Edinburgh has a calming effect—or is it the mountains, trees, and castle within view of anyone standing downtown and simply looking up and around?

Only on the last day did the weather turn nasty. We had been hearing about the New York heat wave, so we did not expect, upon landing in Newark, to meet the exact same weather we had

left behind. Withal no matter the journey, nothing in this space-time continuum beats returning to one's own hearth.

But the Savoy comes close, real close. It is beautiful, of course, and in a way that suits us perfectly: very little chrome, steel, or mirror-lined walls; rather, oak and leather and very fine art make for the Edwardian motif. Everyone knew our name (nothing like a liveried doorman greeting you by your name when you arrive: how?), and the concierge—Dean—was omniscient. Our registration was at a desk in a private room, and the registrar provided her private phone number.

Mostly we settle for things not going wrong. Here some did, small things, addressed immediately and with an amenity as an apology. (One was a miniature, fully equipped toolbox, all of chocolate, made in-house by the hotel *chocolatiere*.) The American Bar (the best pisco sour I've ever had, made not by a Peruvian but a Paraguayan), Kaspar (the restaurant, unassumingly elegant) overlooking the Thames, the Red Elevator with its divan (a truncated fainting couch, much used in its day)—all these together made for its own, self-contained, transcendent experience, becoming more so in memory. My wife reminds me that there are other hotels of the same 'category', for example the Plaza Athenee in Paris, where she says we have stayed. (I'll take her word for it: her memory for travel is virtually eidetic.)

But none quite closes the connection that the Savoy has with Alexandra. Her father was a man variously distinguished in Peru; but during WWII he, who was the first Peruvian congressman to condemn Hitler, was invited to England to meet and confer with Churchill. Those stories and personalities are for another time, but this time it is noteworthy that, when in

London, he stayed at the Savoy, using its stationery for letters—affectionate, newsy, instructive (“spend whatever you must on nylons; here they are unobtainable”)—to Alexandra’s mother back in Lima. Later he would be a guest in Washington, D.C., appearing in Eleanor Roosevelt’s newspaper column, and in New York he wrote for the *New York Times*. (There he stayed at the Waldorf Astoria, of course.)

It was D’Oyly Carte (he of Gilbert and Sullivan) who brought Cesar Ritz to the Savoy, his “new wonder hotel,” and there begins its real history. Ritz’s attention to detail, demand for elegance, and exquisite taste made for the Savoy we now know, with the help, that is, of Auguste Escofier, the leading celebrity chef of the day (and the creator of both Melba Toast and Peach Melba, the first for Dame Nellie Melba when she was dieting, the second for when she was not and—*infamia*—now not on the menu). The list of notables who have not stayed at the Savoy would be shorter than the one of those who have.

In 2007 a renovation was undertaken, its completion in 2010 combining the Edwardian style of the original with the Art Deco of the 1920s and 30s. A recommendation: on your way to the Beaufort Bar dwell a while in the Thames Foyer and behold the winter garden gazebo. Then you will know why Irving Berlin wondered, “Why don’t you go where fashion sits, / Puttin’ on the Ritz”?

Thanks to Alexandra there has been much travel, ready-made metaphors of wonder: the home of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ephesus, Macchu Picchu, the sun-drenched foliage descending to the sea behind the Xenia Hotel on Skiathos, the Alhambra, Lake Como . . . so many others. Both in life and in memory all are incantatory, some even numinous. Along with the adventures

thereunto appertaining (e.g. *charcuterie* at the side of the road along the Loire Valley), these might make for an engaging travel memoir, ranging from Cuzco to Istanbul to Tallinn, St. Petersburg to Sicily: one day. For now, though, I marvel: fifty years ago, providentially, I won my very own Ritz.

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