

THE INCIDENTAL
TOURIST

Something in
the air up there

HARDY STOW

I HAVE never liked cable cars. I am too much of a control freak. The idea of my life being in a stranger's hands has little appeal. But now I am high in the clouds near Merida in Venezuela.

The Teleferico de Merida is the world's highest cable car. It soars to 4765m and stretches 12km from the outskirts of Merida to the summit of Mount Espejo. I arrive early at the cable car station but already there is a two-hour queue. The woman at the ticket window decides I am an *anciano* (senior) and offers a nice price reduction. I accept. *Anciano* I will be. As my turn to board grows closer, we get grouped together. Forty to a group. One group per cabin. I am in group 13.

All goes well until the end of the third stage. It turns out there's a mechanical problem with the final stage. OK. Not what I need. As each ascending cabin arrives, 40 more people join us.

After one long hour, the cable loop for the final stage springs into life again and soon a cabin arrives from up the mountain. It is empty except for two workmen on the roof. One is holding a heavy wheel that looks like those that sit atop a cabin and guide it along the support cables. A dodgy wheel, no doubt. I hope its replacement is a good one.

We are the first lot to go up. I try to forget we are group 13, never an auspicious numeral. Before long the mountain slopes become patchy and then disappear. The white envelops us like a shroud. All is unbroken whiteness; not a single feature is visible. I no longer know how far away I am from the ground.

Only the occasional shudder



Teleferico de Merida, the world's highest cable car

{ WHAT IN THE WORLD }

THE new Formule 1 Auckland Airport (hotelformule1.com) is a much-needed addition to the city's accommodation inventory ahead of the Rugby World Cup. Formule 1 is Accor's budget brand and the just-opened property has rooms from \$NZ79 (\$63) a double (minimum two-night stay on the grand final weekend, from \$NZ190 a night, and including semi-finals nights) • Visa has released a series of three Ultratravel Currency Cards (ultratravelcard.com) that can be pre-loaded at competitive exchange rates with US dollars, euros or pounds sterling respectively; when used in the loaded currency, there are no additional transaction charges • Philippine Airlines and

Specialist Holidays (131 969) have new packages to Manila and beyond from \$1160 a person for four nights, depending on departure ports; the deals are available until September 14 and from October 10 to November 16 for a maximum stay of 14 days • Save up to 50 per cent on London city sightseeing when purchasing a Golden Tours London Hop-on Hop-off bus tour from Holidays to Europe (holidays-to-europe.com.au/specials) • Venture Holidays and Air Pacific (1300 303 343) are celebrating the airline's 60th birthday with a selection of big-value Fiji family packages; valid for sale to October 15 for travel from February 1 to March 31.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

{ THE BIG-CITY HOSPITALITY TEST }

Twice as nice in London



The street-level Capital Dining Room offers fine cuisine amid elegant decor

Twin hotels in
Knightsbridge
provide a special
welcome for
Australian visitors

SUSAN
KUROSAWA

LOCATION is everything in the competitive realms of London accommodation, and from the window alcove of guestroom 275 at The Capital I can see the side and rear of Harrods, arguably the world's most famous store. And here it is, with its deep green canopies and fine facade, on call as my corner shop.

I imagine Kirstie Allsopp and Phil Spencer of *Location, Location, Location* telly fame rocking up and taking one look at The Capital's Basil Street locale, its proximity to Knightsbridge tube station, to the parade of big-brand shops on Brompton Road and Sloane Street, to the retail wonders of Harrods. In my imaginings, Kirstie and Phil nod knowingly to camera as a symphony of cash registers strikes up.

It doesn't stop here. Next door to the 46-room Capital is its little sibling The Levin, just 12 rooms and named confidently for its proprietor, David Levin, whose business card simply states "Hotelier" and who owns vineyards in the Loire Valley. He jokes, with some relish, that the French rejoice in calling him Monsieur le Vin.

That calling card could well say "Old-school hotelier" for here's a man who says he was "born to be in hotels" and is invested in the notion of hospitality, of keeping things small, manageable and in the family.

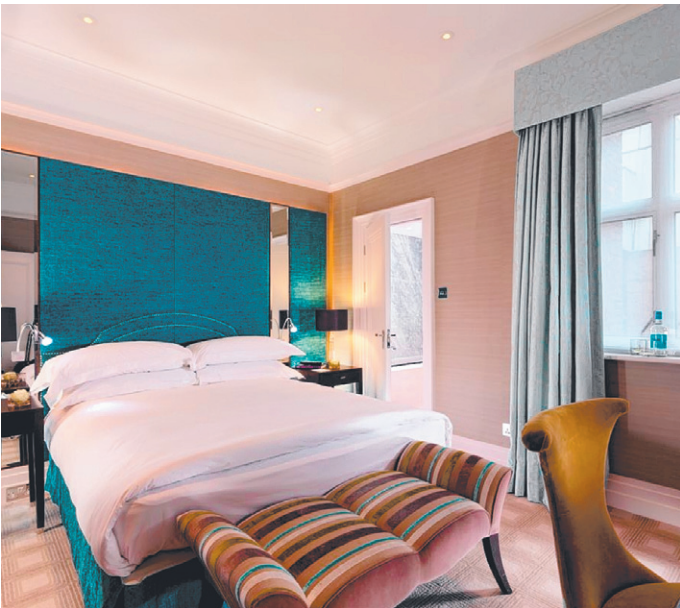
I imagine a register of regulars — unreasonably well-dressed guests up from the best shires for weekends, shows and events, treating The Capital as their preferred London pied-a-terre.

I can't pretend the hotels are well-kept secrets for they are also favourites among Australian travellers in the know (our market represents an estimated 20 per cent of business; Levin's second wife is from Melbourne) and the hotel is always full during Royal Ascot and Wimbledon.

My room at The Capital is cosy, with a super-comfortable bed ("Savior Beds, since 1905" according to the compendium), hillocks of pillows, writing desk, flat-screen TV and a chintzy decor that spells London townhouse. The hotel has 96 staff; service is tip-top.



A junior suite at The Capital



A double room at The Levin

The Capital feels quintessentially London, as if Miss Marple could be spotted knitting in a wing-backed chair

Two days later I move mere metres to The Levin, where the 21st century has landed in the form of contemporary decor, all shiny surfaces, chrome trimmings and forthright colours. There's an honesty drinks cabinet in the lobby and its guestroom mini-bars are stocked with the makings of cocktails, including peach nectar for bellinis; naturally there is an ample supply of Levin organic wine, including a 2009 gamay or rose and a 2007 sauvignon blanc.

Breakfast at The Capital is taken in the street-level Capital Dining Room, which at lunch and

in the evening transforms to a beautiful dining boite where executive chef Jerome Ponchelle dishes up delights as earthly fragrant as ravioli of foie gras with leek and truffle. The decor is front parlour and feminine, with pink-flocked chairs, chandeliers, billowing bluish-grey silk curtains and standard lamps.

At The Levin, one descends to Le Metro at basement level for the morning meal and for a set-price bistro lunch of £15 (\$24) for two courses, which seems an unlikely London bargain in the heart of Knightsbridge. General manager Kate Levin, David's daughter, reckons London's best fish and chips are served here. It's a big claim but the table d'hôte menu does seem satisfyingly cheap, especially considering the spending power of our Australian currency, and it also features shepherd's pie and bangers on mash.

I enjoy both hotels, with a slight



A view from The Capital's 'little sibling' next door, The Levin

preference for The Capital, which feels quintessentially London, as if Miss Marple could be spotted knitting in a wing-backed chair or, if one popped into the pantry, morning-suited butlers would be ironing copies of *The Times* to be delivered with the breakfast trays.

It's all about hall porters versus the tour desk, comfort versus cutting-edge design, professional black-waistcoated waiters versus casual backpackers earning pocket money on their summer breaks. This being London, there's afternoon tea, too, but it's salon-style, in The Capital's pretty little Sitting Room, for £18.50 a pop.

These buildings are not centuries-old piles, however, but ex-apartment buildings that the prescient David Levin bought in the 1970s. The Capital is in its 40th year and to celebrate there's an anniversary menu that pays homage to the hotel's past parade, including founding chef Richard Shepherd. The six-course repast costs £70 (is it just me or is this madly good value, compared with, say, Sydney prices?) or £128 with a flight of wine. I like the sound of a 1980s brandade of Dover sole, courtesy of Brian Turner, the hotel's chef of that era, a photograph of whom appears on the flyer, his droopy moustache worthy of Sonny Bono.

Stepping out, I decide to write

down the names of a few boutiques in this blue-ribbon neighbourhood and then realise I could fill a Moleskine. On Sloane Street, Versace rubs shoulders with Roberto Cavalli and Hermes; there's Pucci, Gucci, Chanel and Christian Dior.

Between the twin peaks of Harrods and Harvey Nichols lie the likes of Swarovski, Massimo Dutti, Zara and Monsoon.

The Capital will send a porter from the concierge desk to pick up your shopping bags if you should flag midway.

On the Knightsbridge dining front, the hot-hot ticket is Dinner by Heston Blumenthal at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park. Lunch bookings are easier to acquire than those for the evening meal; be prepared for sauternes-soaked tipsy cakes and ice-cream trolleys wreathed in clouds of smoke, for recipes resurrected from centuries past, all served with foams and flourish.

The Capital and The Levin concierges also recommend Locanda Locatelli in Seymour Street for Italian, Mint Leaf in Suffolk Place for Indian and Zuma in Raphael Street for pan-Asian cuisine.

Back at The Capital, after my sojourn with Blumenthal's mad-scientist creations, it is almost a relief the next evening to order a

late-night supper in my room of a mushroom omelette and green salad. I have London lag and even the hotel's long-time barman Cesar da Silva can't tempt me to stay up until the summer sun goes down, sipping a creation as colourful as a Royal Ascot hat.

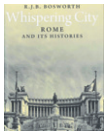
Susan Kurosawa was a guest of The Capital and The Levin and British Airways.

Checklist

The Capital and The Levin are members of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. The former has a new shopping package that includes a £50 shopping voucher for Harrods, cocktail at the bar and afternoon tea; from £300 plus VAT. Both hotels have a three-night package priced in Australian currency that covers round-trip transfers from Heathrow, Kings Cross or City Airport, and lunch or dinner in Le Metro or Capital restaurants. From \$1200. More: capitalhotel.co.uk; thelevinhotel.co.uk; slh.com. British Airways has World Traveller Plus (premium economy) 14-day advance purchase return fares to London for sale to September 30 from \$3255 plus taxes. More: 1300 767 177; ba.com.

{ A LITTLE FLIGHT READING }

Whispering City:
Rome and its
Histories
By R.J.B. Bosworth
(Yale University
Press, \$45)



Cocktail Hour
Under the Tree
of Forgetfulness
By Alexandra Fuller
(Simon & Schuster,
\$29.99)



DESCRIBED by the publisher as a "renowned anglophone Italianist", the author is a professor of history who divides his time between Australia and England. This scholarly work must have been a labour of love, so forensic is its informed delving into the layerings of the so-called Eternal City. Referencing the church, the citizenry of past eras, the city's famous figures and its often flawed politicians, Richard Bosworth illuminates the "rival and competing messages" of Rome's "whispering" history. The result is no leisurely skim but those with a nose for history will love this grand assembly of detail and debate about a truly magnificent city. More: inbooks.com.au.

ALEXANDRA JAMES

READERS who loved Alexandra Fuller's 2002 memoir, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, will welcome her latest book. She grew up on ever-poorer farms in Rhodesia, Malawi and Zambia in the 1970s and 80s; there was civil war on the doorstep and cobras in the pantry, and she blamed herself when her younger sister drowned. This second book revolves around the histories of her English parents, Nicola and Tim Fuller, of their tragedy-torn lives and the peace they finally make with Africa under the Tree of Forgetfulness, where villagers meet to resolve disputes. The Fullers seem reconciled, too, that their daughter is about to write another "awful" book about them.

SUSAN KUROSAWA



CTS Tours
a lasting impression

Inclusions

- International & domestic Economy Class air tickets as per itinerary
- Airport taxes & fuel surcharge
- 4-star hotel accommodation
- Meals, transfers and sightseeing entries as per itinerary
- Air-conditioned sightseeing coaches & English speaking guides

Terms & Conditions

- Price quoted is per person twin-share departing Sydney; surcharge may apply departing other cities
- Seasonal surcharge applied for departure dates with the symbol ^
- 10 people to depart except China Panorama minimum 2
- Price shown is subject to seat availability, fluctuation of taxes and fuel surcharge

Call 1300 764 224
OR visit www.chinatraveltours.com.au
China Travel Service (Aust) Pty Ltd trading as CTS Tours Lic. No. 27A001849



China Highlights Beijing, Xi'an, Guilin, Longsheng, Yangshuo, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Shanghai Depart: 9/10^, 23/10, 11/11, 25/12^ on Air China or Qantas * Air China from \$2700; Qantas from \$2980	Tour Code: SDCA05/SDQF06 13 nights, 14 days from \$2,700	
China Spirit Beijing, Xi'an, Suzhou, Shanghai Depart: 21/9^, 15/10 on China Eastern	Tour Code: SEMU09 7 nights, 8 days from \$1,950	
Yangtze Cruise Delights Shanghai, Nanjing, Yellow Mt., Wuhan, Yichang, Three Gorges, Chongqing, Hong Kong Depart: 14/10^, 28/10 on Qantas	Tour Code: SDQF05 12 nights, 13 days from \$2,870	
Ice & Snow Tour Harbin, Changchun, Shenyang, Dalian, Shanghai Depart: 5/1/2012 on China Eastern	Tour Code: SEMU03 9 nights, 10 days from \$2,250	
China Panorama Beijing, Xi'an, Guilin, Longsheng, Yangshuo, Kunming, Dali, Lijiang, Chongqing, Yangtze River, Yichang, Shanghai Depart: 10/9, 24/9, 08/10, 22/10, 12/11, 10/12^ on various airlines * China visa fee included for Australian passport holder	Tour Code: EF 20 nights, 21 days from \$5,100	
Magnificent Vietnam Hanoi, Halong Bay, Hue, Hoi An, Danang, Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City Depart: 28/9^, 26 Oct, 18/1 2012^ on Vietnam Airlines	Tour Code: SEVN05 8 nights, 9 days from \$1,990	
China • Japan • Indo China • India • Nepal • New Zealand • North America		

ALEXANDRA JAMES

SUSAN KUROSAWA