

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 join but 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

of the cabin tells me we are moving. People around me chat and restless children press against the windows. Then ahead of us a small black dot appears. It grows slowly until it morphs into another cable-car cabin and passes close by us before shrinking away. Then nothing again. But we reach the summit safely.

Naively, I have not expected the freezing temperature. Ah yes, Merida sits between the equator and the Caribbean, but we are now close to 5km above sea level. I can't discern any pathways through the rocks, ice and snow except one leading past a warning sign showing the silhouette of a man, limbs flailing, plunging upside down over the edge. There is an entire world up there but I can see only a few metres ahead.

Two years earlier in La Paz, I made a terrible discovery — altitude sickness. Since then I've known the early signs — a weird, vacuous feeling and a slowly creeping and then swelling headache. I realise I have to be in the next cabin to return to a saner altitude.

I suppose the Teleferico de Merida is more rewarding when you can see the vastness of the Andes opening up around you as you climb and when you can explore the world around the summit. But for me the white-out makes the day more extraordinary. And the Teleferico is remarkable; by day's end I have developed an admiration for the engineering that lies within its many kilometres.

I'd love to do it all again. I really would. But I'll have to wait. It's been shut down for safety reasons. An entirely new cable car will replace it next year.



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 (131969) 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.

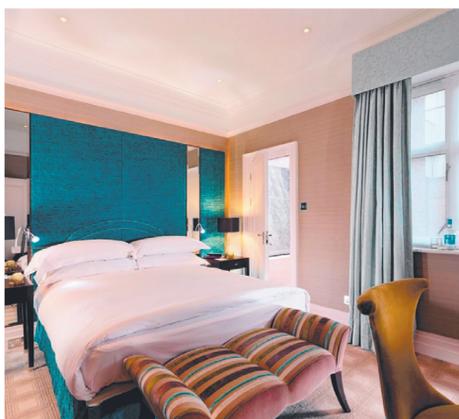
I imagine a register of regulars — unreasonably well-dressed guests up from the best shires for weekends, shows and events, treating The Capital as their preferred London pied-a-terre.

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 earthily 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 Mokeskin. 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

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