



The Ultimate Holiday

We went, we saw, we travelled in the lap of luxury. But in a good cause: to bring you World's ultimate European holiday.



We were standing under the elegant red marquee outside The Goring hotel in London when a familiar figure emerged and was ushered into a waiting car. Was that ...? Yes, said Peter the doorman, that was indeed Baroness Thatcher; The Goring is her favourite London hotel and its dining room her favourite lunch spot – the former British PM had dined there recently with Henry Kissinger.

We were beginning to realise that our accommodation – chosen mainly for its proximity to Victoria Station – was something pretty special, which was no more than we should have expected from what many say is London's finest privately-owned hotel, a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace.

The Goring was to be our launching pad for a holiday that had been many months in the making. Its closeness to Victoria Station – a five-minute walk away – was an important consideration because that's where we were to board the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express (VSOE) in three days' time.

Six months earlier, we'd been sitting in Auckland poring over maps and trawling the internet in an effort to devise *World's* ultimate escape: a European holiday that would eventually include the romance of the Orient-Express, the exquisite delights of Venice and a luxury cruise from Venice to Rome via the coast of

Croatia and Montenegro and the legendary island of Sorrento.

But the ultimate holiday doesn't just happen, it takes planning. What fun, though, to bring the pieces of the jigsaw together into a seamless itinerary of stress-free travel, unforgettable sights, fine food and great accommodation.

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express had been an easy choice, fulfilling a long-held ambition to ride the legendary train. A few days in London would help us over the long flight from Auckland and our research turned up The Goring as the perfect base from which to explore Britain's capital city.

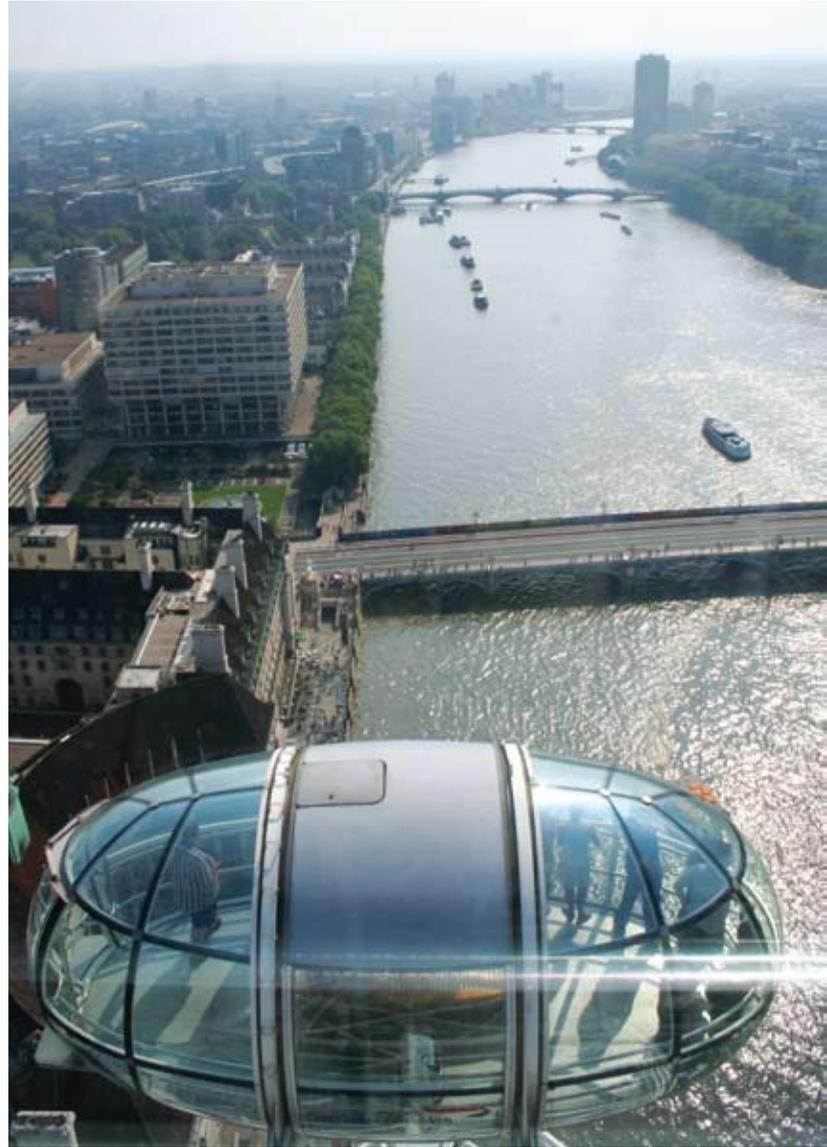
Orient-Express' beautiful Hotel Cipriani seemed an obvious choice for a few days in Venice, but then where? By chance we stumbled upon a sea voyage that meshed perfectly with our proposed schedule: a culinary cruise from Venice to Rome aboard the Silver Whisper, the newest all-suite ship in the Silversea fleet, last year voted the world's best small ship cruise line at the *Condé Nast Traveller* awards in London. The Leading Hotels of the World directory turned up the fabulous Hotel De Russie for our stay in Rome.

Now all that was left was to pick the airline that would take us to Europe. Emirates was the obvious choice: its routing options easily trumped other airlines' – we'd fly to London via Dubai and return from Rome instead of having to backtrack to London.

Above: Venice and the Giudecca Canal.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Changing of the guard – and a breather in London; the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express winds through a Swiss meadow; a vision of ancient Rome; Positano, on the Amalfi coast, is famous for its colourful ceramics.

Capital comfort



We couldn't have chosen a more comfortable, stylish base than The Goring for our London stay. With its 66 luxurious guest rooms and seven suites, it's full of British character in the nicest way; never overstated or in the least bit stuffy, despite its eminent clientele and 100-year history. From here we ventured out into Knightsbridge and Sloane St., wandered through Piccadilly and did the tourist thing on an open-topped double-decker. We ogled the city from the remarkable London Eye and ducked into one or two of those brilliant British pubs.

You can, of course, find every cuisine under the sun in London, but for the very best of British food served with impeccable style, The Goring's graceful dining room (recently redesigned by the Queen's nephew, Viscount Linley) is hard to beat. Like the hotel itself, it has won numerous awards, including the 2005 ITV Tio Pepe Prize for best British restaurant. On our last night in London we dined royally from a menu that included Beluga caviar (£200 for 50g), "haggis wi' neeps 'n' tatties", wild rabbit stew and Loch Duart salmon. The hotel's gardens provide the fresh vegetables, herbs and even truffles.

Top left: A private breakfast setting at The Goring in London.
Above: View from the London Eye.
Left: Doorman Peter Sweeney on duty at The Goring.

Grand style



The next day we said goodbye to The Goring and made our way to Victoria Station with the help of one of the hotel's doormen. The tip was money well spent and we were delivered in style to the VSOE's red-carpet reception area. From here, everything took on a magical air. We were ushered to our seats and made comfortable in seconds. Champagne in hand, we scanned the lunch menu (Inverawe smoked Loch Etive trout, roasted breast of free-range chicken filled with a crayfish mousse, wild berry, Champagne and elderflower jelly) as our British Pullman carriage glided out of the station heading for Folkstone. Lunch was served, wine opened and the passing British countryside had never looked so good.

At Folkestone we were transferred to a coach which took us to Cheriton and onto "Le Shuttle" for the rail trip through the Chunnel to France. At Calais our uniformed hostesses delivered us to the historic Wagons-Lits carriages of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express waiting at the station in all their gleaming glory.

Train journeys that draw on a bygone era of refinement and glamour are what the VSOE is all about, and inside the meticulously restored 19th-century carriages was a scene of mellow lighting, shining brass and delicate wooden marquetry. The restaurant car was all white linen, silver and crystal and the Bar Car featured its own

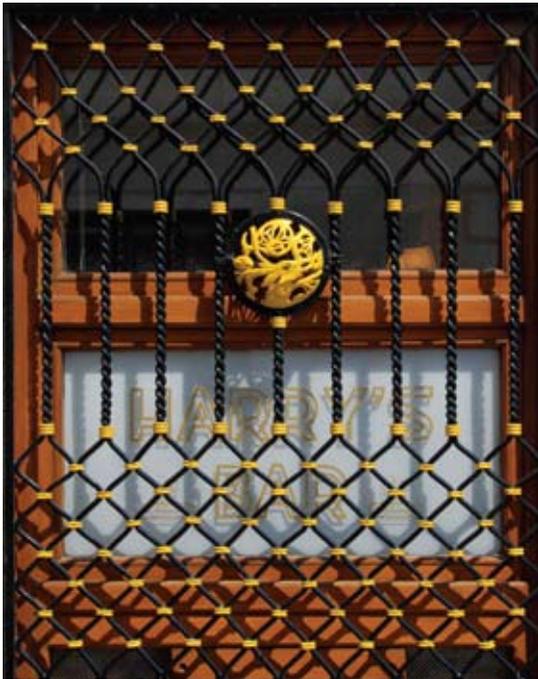
baby grand piano – with pianist. Our cabin was small but elegant, with walls of polished wood and a plush banquette which converted into bunks.

Passengers are expected to complete this vision of past elegance by dressing for dinner; and that evening expensive glamour was on display wherever you looked. After a superb four-course dinner prepared by the train's French chefs, we retired to the cosy bar for a drink before bed. We were in Paris some time after 9pm and as the VSOE continued on its way towards Italy, we made our way back to our compartment, now magically transformed into a bedroom by our steward, a Scotsman called Ronald.

Ronald woke us next morning with breakfast and we lifted the blinds on a vista of Swiss meadows and mountain peaks, followed by more beautiful alpine scenery as we passed through tiny Liechtenstein. We were in Innsbruck before noon and out of Austria and into Italy before lunch had ended. That afternoon we passed through the Brenner Pass and the stunning scenery of the Italian Dolomites. Afternoon tea was served in our compartment and, as the train crossed the Venetian Lagoon, we reluctantly prepared to disembark. We pulled into Santa Lucia station at 5.46pm on the dot.

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express revives a bygone era of luxury travel.





The arrival procedure was as seamless as our departure from Victoria Station. A VSOE hostess awaited us, our bags arrived from nowhere and a porter took them under his wing. A few minutes later we were aboard our private launch, bags safely stowed and heading for the Hotel Cipriani. The Ultimate Holiday had shifted gears once more.

Nothing had prepared us for our first encounter with this beautiful city, but our evening cruise to the Cipriani, which overlooks the basin of St Marks, was breathtaking. And so was the hotel, set in lovely gardens at the end of Giudecca Island, with an Olympic-size swimming pool (the only one in central Venice) fronting the canal and views of San Giorgio and the distant islands of the lagoon. Our accommodation for the next four nights was in the exquisite, marble-and-gold Palladio Suite. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out on the Venetian Lagoon and outside, in a small, jasmine-scented garden, was our own 4.5-metre plunge pool and heated Jacuzzi.

The list of those who've stayed at the Cipriani over the past 50 years is long and impressive and we wondered who'd slept in our grand, canopied bed before us – Princess Di, perhaps, Steven Spielberg, Sophia Loren?

The hotel provides a complimentary 24-hour launch service to St Mark's Square (five minutes away) and from

there we wandered through Venice's timeless streets; the Zattere quay, with its fabulous sunset panoramas; the rococo churches with their heavenly frescoes; the gondola workshop at San Trovaso; the narrow lanes with their cafés and tiny pizza joints.

Everyone's heard of Harry's Bar and (in the name of research) we had to pay a visit: after all, the man who founded it in 1931, Giuseppi Cipriani, had also built our hotel. Just off St Mark's Square on Calle Vallaresso, Harry's Bar is a Venetian institution. The restaurant is usually packed but we had no trouble finding a seat at the bar, where we ordered a couple of Harry's famous Bellini cocktails – one third peach juice, two thirds cold prosecco – and handed over around \$60 for the two. They were delicious, though, and I guess the price included a good slice of history.

When in Venice, the glass factories of Murano are a must-see, and Gastone, the Cipriani's concierge, organised a water taxi to take us to the island. Signoretti Le Bricole is perhaps the most famous of Murano's glassmakers and we spent a brilliant afternoon touring the factory and browsing the colourful profusion of glass pieces – among them vivid creations by Maestro Walter Furlan inspired by the works of Picasso.

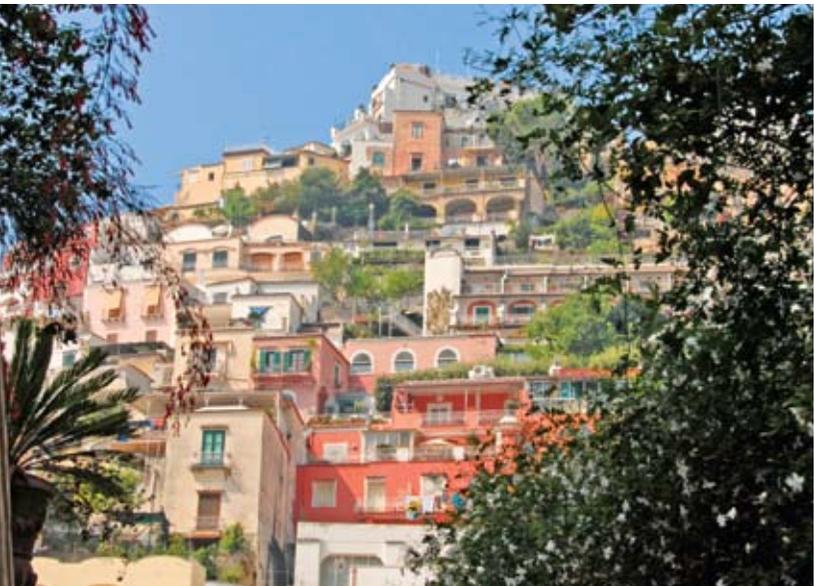
Facing page: Four faces of the Hotel Cipriani, Venice.

Above from left: A discreet sign announces Harry's Bar; Bellinis under construction at the bar; a gondola on a tourist beat.

Below: A typical Venetian scene; a Picasso-inspired work in lead crystal from Signoretti Le Bricole.



Sailing away



Ports of call:
In Venice; the beauty of the Croatian coast; hillside houses in Positano, on Italy's Amalfi coast; a roadside fruit and veg stall.

On the morning we were to join our cruise, we caught a water taxi from the Cipriani to the San Basilio cruise terminal, a 10-minute trip that cost 60 euros (\$114). Just pay up and smile – this is Venice.

We were welcomed aboard the Silver Whisper with a fabulous cocktail reception – a “Champagne Sail Away” as the daily purser’s log put it. Gina, our stewardess, showed us to our suite and inquired about our preferences in the beverage line. By the time we left port we were well stocked. This was an all-inclusive cruise: for seven glorious days we could put our wallets away and not buy a single round. The only things you pay for are spa treatments, optional meals in the very special Le Champagne restaurant and shore excursions.

Leaving Venice that evening was an unforgettable experience. Standing on the upper deck, Champagne in hand, we watched the city slide by as we moved slowly up the Giudecca Canal past Saint Mark’s and into the Canale di San Marco. We were in a flotilla of three white cruise ships leaving Venice that evening and must have presented an impressive sight to those on shore. Silver Whisper was the smallest of the three liners and

this would allow us to slip into exotic ports denied to the larger ships.

The evening departure ritual – mingling comfortably with other passengers on the top deck over a glass of Champagne – became a regular event during the next week; a week that drifted by increasingly smoothly as we sank into that state of deep relaxation shipboard life seems to induce.

It was a very special time and, back in Auckland, much of it remained with us: the wonderful food (under guest chef Renato Piccolotto from the Cipriani); breakfast on our private verandah; the shore visits, especially our trip to the Croatian World Heritage town of Trogir, near Split, and a full-day trip to the Amalfi coast and Positano; the pool deck (nothing beats sitting high above the ocean drinking ice-cold Mexican beer and nibbling on prawn cocktails!); a top-deck barbecue under the stars; the ability to see many different places without having to pack and unpack; the Norwegian salmon, which somehow refused to run out; cashless wining and dining; and, above all, we loved the bed – Silversea must surely have the best beds in the world.



When in Rome



Above: The Nijinsky Suite at Hotel De Russie and a dinner setting on its private terrace overlooking the rooftops of Rome.
Below: Ancient history comes to life among the Eternal City's ruins.



We were sad to leave our floating home when we finally docked at Civitavecchia, the port of Rome: it's easy to see how cruising can become addictive. But we had three days of cultural and retail therapy ahead before flying back to the remnants of an Auckland winter. And another grand hotel awaited our arrival.

The Hotel De Russie, on Via del Babuino, built in the early 19th century, is a true work of art framing an internal courtyard and terraced gardens. The "Secret Garden" proved to be a peaceful retreat from the bustle of central Rome. The De Russie is right in the heart of the city, beside the Villa Borghese Gardens and between the Piazza del Popolo and the Spanish Steps. Rome's most famous shopping street, the Via Condotti, is a short walk away.

Inside the hotel we found an oasis of Italian refinement and luxury. Our bedroom, like most of the hotel's 124 rooms and suites, was designed by Tommaso Ziffer with lots of individual touches, such as the mosaic-tiled bathroom.

But the real showpiece of the hotel, and of which *World* was granted a sneak peek, is the top-floor Nijinsky Suite, dedicated to the legendary Russian dancer. Designed by Olga Polizzi, it's a masterpiece of modern chic. But the suite's huge terrace is the real star: a private haven surrounded by terracotta pots full of flowers and shrubs and with views over the rooftops of Rome that are truly breathtaking.

By now our thirst for new sights and experiences had been just about quenched, and our only two major expeditions were to the Vatican and the Coliseum. Otherwise, we were happy to wander, to shop, to admire the spectacle of cocktails being expertly made in the De Russie's Stravinskij Bar and to dine under a Roman sky at the wonderful Le Jardin de Russie.

Memories, as they say, are made of this. 🍷

World devised this "ultimate holiday" with you the reader in mind. Our travel partner, Voyage Affaires, can help you create your own ultimate holiday experience.

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