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*Chic
to chic*

A passion for fashion and style

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READING BETWEEN THE LINES



Chic, { to chic

A passion for fashion and style

When Charles Frederick Worth became the first man to design gowns for women – and did it so well – in the 19th century, it marked a new high point of the long-standing love affair between American socialites and the European style gurus

Europe seemed to epitomise style; from the cut and cloth of Parisian couture to the exquisite elegance of Italian interiors, it was a Continent of Chic; Europe had taste, Europe had sophistication. Where the Old World led, the New World looked to follow.

It's a tradition that happily continues; a journey to Europe is still a rich and varied odyssey of style.

Euro chic? C'est magnifique!

Karen Robinovitz, American fashionista and co-author of *The Fashionista Files: Adventures in Four-Inch Heels and Faux Pas* (Ballantine Books, USA) is a great fan of European style in all its variations and guises through couture, culture, design, interiors and service.

'European style is both classy and sophisticated,' says Robinovitz.

'There is such a natural sense of chic in everything from fashion to furniture and hotels; an innate richness and glamour that has not been tainted by what I call massification; the growing desire to appeal to the masses which tends to dilute and diminish.'

For Robinovitz like many other Americans, there is something extraordinary and exotic about being in a European hotel. 'Every little thing from the telephone to the bathroom fixtures are totally un-American' she says. 'And that serves as a constant reminder of being in a new place, on vacation, away from the stresses of everyday life.'

European style is perceived around the world as a real class act. Tea is not just served in Martha Stewart white china but in a silver tea service, fit for a king. European hotels offer more than just a place to sleep; they offer exoticism, escapism and a taste of another time and world.

Kavita Daswani's extensive travels to Europe as a fashion correspondent for CNN have left her a total convert to European style. And something of an expert!

'I can spot a European across the room based on what he or she is wearing,' laughs LA based-Daswani, author of *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (Penguin Putnam, USA).

'European style is something wonderfully mannered, deliberate and substantial – not the kind of throwaway-chic that is so nouveau America.'

'I've stayed at some really glorious, stylish places with a unique feel of the old world about them; something

that's almost impossible to find in America – concierges with starched shirts and impeccable manners, and handwritten notes left at the front desk.'

Daswani admires the way that traditional elements of European style work in harmony with cutting edge, contemporary designs and innovations. 'At one end of the spectrum the hotels are grand, historic and well maintained; at the other end they are minimalist, pared down, almost avant-garde,' she says. Either way, to Daswani's well trained eye, they epitomise true style.

'Fundamentally,' she says, 'I suppose style – across the board – is very important to the Europeans. It's something they think about, care about, and invest in. And ultimately, I guess it shows.' →

Inspirational interiors

London-based Inge Moore, a director of the international hospitality design company, Hirsch Bedner Associates, agrees that Europeans generally eschew mass design and are willing to invest in style, authenticity and originality.

'European hotels spend money and energy on creating the perfect ambience and to remind their guests that when they are in Paris, they really are in Paris,' says Moore. The rooms, she admits may sometimes be small, 'But they're quaint and more individual than American hotel rooms.'

The best European hospitality design often reflects local and cultural influences; as many hotels are based in old cities or buildings with a vast amount of history and tradition. And this, for Moore, is the best part of the deal for both designers and travellers.

'Designers can draw on these cultural inspirations while adding a contemporary twist to create something truly memorable,' says Moore.

Jacques Garcia, known for his flamboyant style, did exactly that when designing the Radisson SAS Grand Hotel in Bordeaux where he evokes the history and traditions imbued in French winemaking throughout the property. Known for his maxim that 'nothing succeeds like excess', Garcia has always been inspired by local legends and history.

This is evident at the famous L'Hôtel in Paris, where Garcia took a legendary hotel and redesigned it with a retro-contemporary spirit, while respecting its traditional origins.

Increasingly, travellers to Europe opt to stay in one of the growing breed of urban-based lifestyle hotels that cater for discerning guests with innovative art, imaginative design and high-end technology. Their standalone restaurants seduce diners with a hip atmosphere and first class creative cuisine.

But the real hallmark of a lifestyle hotel is that it is housed in a property of special architectural significance, like the beautiful and historic old office

building, now home to the boutique Radisson SAS 1919 Hotel in Reykjavik.

From Berlin to Budapest, from Brussels to Bratislava, Europe, with its wealth of heritage and history, offers travellers an infinite array of different experiences, ranging from the impeccably traditional to the impressively innovative.

Variety is the spice of style

Herbert Ypma, author of the upcoming Hip Hotel Atlas (Thames & Hudson; November 2005), is constantly delighted by the 'quality and the variety of European style.'

'France, Greece, Austria, Spain and Portugal may all share the same currency, but that's about it ...and it is precisely the differences between these countries that makes them so compelling,' he says. 'The food, the culture, the people and the architecture are like a code that shapes our imagination. Most of us have a picture in our mind of what we expect, or more accurately what we want, from a location.'

The right choice of hotel, Ypma stresses, is a crucial factor for travellers wanting an authentic and inspirational experience. Choose well, he advises, and without reading a single guidebook or taking a single guided tour 'you will learn more about a place than any package tour will teach you, no matter how many sights you take in.'

Nina Campbell, one of Britain's best-loved interior designers, agrees with Ypma that national preferences make it hard to talk about a homogenised modern European style.

'Europe is even less connected in design than it is politically. There's often more rivalry than common ground. Every country has its own style and preferences,' says Campbell who is best known for her stylish and timeless fabrics, like those used in London's Radisson SAS Portman hotel.

According to Campbell, Italian design mixes super-modern sleek with palazzo style, while German design is more classical. Scandinavians favour cool,

clean lines while the Spanish are alarmingly derivative at times. 'We've had a lot of trouble with them simply copying our designs,' she says with some amazement.

Campbell has mixed feelings about French design. On the one hand she loves it; on the other she finds it downright strange.

'You open the wardrobe door in an apartment where nothing much has been changed since the sixties and you'll find it stuffed full of the latest Chanel collection,' says Campbell, 'I was once told this was because there was a tax on homes so people traditionally chose to spend their money on couture rather than interiors.'

Campbell has a huge US fan base and works with American furniture designers like Julie Gray. Her clients appreciate that while her design is essentially British, it travels well; since the days of the Grand Tour, British designers have had the knack of combining comfort with formality.

'That's our great trick,' says Campbell proudly. 'There's a danger that an element of comfort gets sacrificed in modern design. But I believe comfort is still a key factor in successful interior styling. Design has to look good. But it has to work as well. That's the real secret of successful style.' {}

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