

The Hotel Police

Going undercover with the arbiter of greatness in hospitality.

BY ANN ABEL

HE SLEEPS AT A GRAND HOTEL

in Paris on Monday, drives through French wine country Tuesday, polishes off an 11-course dinner outside Vienna Wednesday and flies to Spain on Thursday. A charmed existence, maybe, but a life of leisure it's not.

Between the cheese trolleys and feather duvets he speeds along a rainy A6, fighting with an unfamiliar GPS and having exasperating phone conversations with a Moscow hotel in an attempt to sort out a Russian visa. At Charles de Gaulle he makes a beeline for the Oneworld lounge, then has his belt off and iPhone out before he even approaches security. He's asleep as soon as he takes his seat on the flight to Vienna, the paperback on his lap unread yet again—he'd been up writing well past midnight.

I'm tagging along with an inspector for Relais & Châteaux, the hotel-and-restaurant association whose members pride themselves on what they call their "five Cs": courtesy, charm, character, calm and cuisine. We're "reinspecting" hotels in France and Austria, which, as with all members and would-be members, are rigorously secret-shopped by anonymous inspectors. Like many of the nine inspectors, my host, whom I'll call M., comes from a hospitality background, having graduated from Swiss hotel school and worked at the likes of the Ritz in Paris



RAFAEL TRAPIET / GETTY IMAGES FOR FORBES

and Claridge's in London. "Hotels are excelling when they provide pleasure, and it's my job to be receptive and have pleasure," he tells me on the drive.

Six years in—and having helped design the inspections regimen—M. is arguably the association's go-to undercover man. He sees 150 hotels a year from Zimbabwe to New Zealand, visiting them in marathon trips that give him chunks of time to see his family and run a consulting business on the Mediterranean island he calls home. Even if he's spent more than eight hours in transit, he typically stays just one night and leaves right after breakfast. While some inspectors work as couples,

he usually visits romantic hotels alone. He makes all his own bookings—that's part of the inspection—arranges his own flights and suffers through delays like everyone else. He slides easily between French and German with local staff, Spanish with his office and English with the Russians and me.


Checking into a hotel, he hits the ground running: eating lunch when there's time, examining his room, touring the grounds, ordering coffee in the lounge, talking to staff, testing the gym or spa, having an aperitif and the biggest dinner available, discreetly taking notes all the while. He's not ticking off a checklist but writing mini term

papers about whether hotels have the old-fashioned intangibles that have defined Relais & Châteaux for nearly 60 years: "fellowship," "moments of harmony," "a feeling of being" (whatever that is) and, most important, "the soul of the innkeeper."

Whenever possible he squeezes in an hour-long run to fit into his 31-waist Levi's, fight jet lag and show up hungry for his next meal. He writes as he goes and aims to have reports—which can be 5,000 words—90% done before he checks out, as it's the only way to keep it all straight.

His reports are read by the association's board of directors, member hoteliers who vote on prospective members. Even though Relais & Châteaux has grown to more than 500 properties in 60 countries, President Jaume Tàpies says members feel strongly about not diluting the brand. Rare among hotel alliances, the association returns all profits to its members and derives only about a quarter of its revenue from membership fees. (The rest comes from guest booking fees and gift certificates.) Of the hundreds of hotels that are prospected and inspected each year, only about 30% are invited to join. Members are reinspected every three years, and some 20 to 30 get cut annually. "The worst part of my job," says Tàpies, "is to tell friends—because we know them all—that the quality is not up to standard and they have to quit."

Having managed two Relais & Châteaux hotels himself, M. knows what's at stake, and what to look for. Experience has made him efficient, but he's blessed with a photographic memory and aided by surreptitious photo- and note-taking on his iPhone. One evening we enjoy a lively conversation over an 11-course dinner with wine pairings, a meal that I recall as quite pleasant. His report reads, in part: "This very refreshing start to a wonderful menu consisted of a fish fumet jelly mixed with small pieces of different local smoked fish and a carrot brunoise. The jelly was topped with a most beautiful selection of wild herbs and small



Relais & Châteaux
President Jaume
Tàpies (not an
inspector) at
member hotel the
Saint James in Paris.

flowers, all edible. Knowing the chef's presentation skills, the plastic cup was certainly meant to reflect the way this dish, in a much simpler form, is offered in local restaurants in Vienna."

Our first stop is a longtime member in central France that I've been asked not to name. It's not a bad stay, but it's not all moments of harmony. Our check-in, partly outside in the rain, is disorganized, and we aren't offered a seat or a beverage. Although the owner is sitting by the receptionist, she doesn't introduce herself until after dinner, when she becomes friendly and helpful. There are no welcome letters or flowers in our rooms, and we have shrink-wrapped plastic cups instead of proper glasses. Servers in the bistro are inattentive and put out by my pescetarian diet, and lunch is indifferently prepared. (Dinner in the formal restaurant is better, though my sea bass is submerged under more foam than I've seen since the '90s.) Sightseeing suggestions are way off-base. I wonder if Relais & Châteaux brought me here to prove the inspections' value.

M. zeroes in on even more shortcomings: His report mentions that bathroom windows compromise privacy, bistro servers left us to refill our own water glasses, the veal tongue on his lunch plate was unseasoned and very chewy, and the cheese trolley lacked a cover. The report concludes by saying the hotel needs to "scrutinize its welcome procedure, its attention to detail ... focus more on its soul of the innkeeper" and improve the food and service in its bistro to be up to Relais & Châteaux standards.

After a 6:30 breakfast we drive three hours back to Paris, fly to Vienna and drive another hour to Taubenkobel in Schützen am Gebirge, which I'm allowed to name because the hotel has charm in spades. The owner greets us when we walk in, wheels our luggage to our rooms in a wagon and slows her speech when she notices I'm trying to dust off my college German. We're




Austria's charming Taubenkobel, above, earned a glowing report during its R&C reinspection.

taken to a lovely courtyard garden and served rosé made by the owners' daughter, then given directions for a beautiful lakeside walk.

Instead of menus, we're handed letter openers and envelopes that contain a note about how the biodynamic and sustainably produced menu changes daily, along with a list of the night's

dishes—sublimely earthy morels stuffed with veal with a chervil reduction, a visually seductive pairing of beets and cherries with acacia blossoms and shaved frozen foie gras—and although we don't alert them to my picky eating until I've sheepishly declined the pork-dusted popcorn that starts the meal, they uncomplainingly improvise delectable substitutions. Every presentation is inventive, and the wine pairings—we choose the daughter's wines, whose labels have drawings of fictional people she thinks the wines resemble—complement the farmy flavors. Service is friendly and spectacularly attentive. Taubenkobel lands on my alltime top-ten restaurants list.

Its continued Relais & Châteaux membership is virtually assured for now. As for the French hotel, the association's board will review M.'s report, possibly call the owners to a hearing and send them their report with a warning that they will be inspected again in 6 to 12 months. If they haven't gotten their act together by then, they could get the ax. In any case, properties always receive the reports or summaries of them, since the reports are intended foremost to help them improve.

Members and candidates find the feedback useful. New York restaurateur Danny Meyer's name was synonymous with "hospitality" long before his Eleven Madison Park joined Relais & Châteaux in 2009. Proud as he is to belong to this club—he tells me the affirmation was a highlight of his career—he also confides that he didn't get in on his first try: His restaurant the Modern didn't pass when it was inspected shortly after it opened. "What was great about it," he says, "is that it was a private failure, like getting a bad report card, but you don't have to tell the rest of the world. It gave us a blueprint for how to do things [Relais & Châteaux-style], and it made the Eleven Madison Park one all the more gratifying. We know this is not just given to anybody." 

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