



Pera Palace Hotel in its 1920s' heyday (above); a refurbished room (far left); and famous guest Agatha Christie (left)

Sleeping in elegance

Istanbul's historic hotel gets a facelift

Just off Istanbul's crowded Istiklal Caddesi, a historic powerhouse is emerging from the tarpaulin after years of renovation. During the heyday of the Orient Express, the **Pera Palace Hotel** was the address in Istanbul for travellers who wanted to sleep and socialise in style, including the young Ernest Hemingway and Greta Garbo. Agatha Christie, who regularly stayed in room 411, found inspiration for *Murder on the Orient Express* here.

The two-year, £19.5 million restoration is due for completion by September, giving Istanbul yet another architectural gem for its year as European Capital of Culture 2010. As well as new features including a spa, the renovation has preserved the original design's mix of oriental, art nouveau and art deco styles.

The area around the hotel's neo-classical facade, once known as Little Europe, is less deferent to the past. Yellow taxis honk their horns and satellite dishes riddle the roofs above the Golden Horn. Nonetheless, stepping beneath the Pera Palace's high ceilings is still a romantic prospect. I poked my nose in the other day, entering via the Kubbeli Saloon-Tea Lounge, with its chandeliers and opulent, domed ceiling. The 115 bedrooms and connecting corridors are darker affairs, although you might suddenly come across a panoramic view, or the biggest bath you've ever seen. Former guests hope the restoration does not erase the atmosphere of elegant decay, which offers, at Europe's meeting with Asia, the feel of a gloriously bohemian British country house.

perapalace.com



James Bainbridge is currently updating the 12th edition of the Lonely Planet's Turkey guide.



TRAVEL PUNDIT Tom Hall

Lonely Planet's UK-based travel editor shares his latest insider news and tip-offs

Volcanic travel assurances, rail and sail to Holland, Saudi Arabian access, round-the-world routes, Petra price hike and an East End design hotel



ASH INSURANCE

Travellers found out how good their travel insurance was when Iceland's volcano blew its top, and some travel companies are now trying to assuage concerns about future eruptions. Discover the World set up a customer charter to assure customers of refunds and hotels in the event of any future volcanic disruption (discover-the-world.co.uk).



THE BEST ROUND THE WORLD EVER?

Bored of the same old round the world routes? SkyTeam airline alliance now has some unusual routes for the price of more well-trodden ones, incorporating cities such as Johannesburg, Nairobi, Kathmandu, Guangzhou, Sydney, Los Angeles, San José, Atlanta and New York. For help devising an interesting itinerary, ask roundtheworldflights.com.



RAIL & SAIL

Cross-channel ferries have been the saviour of volcano-troubled Britons, although both Calais and Dover lost their maritime rail stations when Eurostar began. For a more streamlined service to the continent seek out Stena Line's dutchflyer service, with rail and sail packages from London or East Anglia to the Netherlands, from £29 (stenaline.co.uk).



PETRA PRICE

Foreign visits to Petra rose by more than 50 per cent in the first quarter of the year, a trade driven in part by day-trips from cruise passengers and visitors to Egypt's Red Sea resorts. But visits are set to get more expensive - Jordanian authorities want people to stay longer, increasing the Petra entrance fee for day-trippers not overnighing in Jordan from £20 to £58.



GETTING INTO SAUDI

Saudi Arabia is lightening its icy tourist policy, making it slightly easier to see attractions such as Mada'in Saleh, a rock-hewn city, and dive in the Red Sea. While entry is still limited to groups, these can now number as few as four. Visits are still unusual, so go with a specialist tour operator such as The Traveller (the-traveller.co.uk).



BETHNAL GREEN BOUTIQUE

A welcome addition to the regeneration of Bethnal Green in London's East End - more famous for the infamous Krays - is the opening of a new design hotel. The Town Hall Hotel & Apartments comprises five-star apartments and chic hotel rooms in the Grade II-listed, Edwardian former council building (townhallhotel.com; doubles from £203).

PHOTOGRAPHS: FAMOUSHOTELS.COM; GETTY IMAGES; FRASER GUN

Night skies

The arrival of World Heritage Starlight Reserves

Sitting atop New Zealand's **Mount John**, the Astro Café could be the planet's most spectacular location for coffee and cake. Lake Tekapo's waters (right) and the Southern Alps stretch to the horizon below. Return after dark and the panorama stretches a little further - about 160,000 light years. One evening, I spy the Southern Cross's fifth smallest star, the star cluster of Pleiades and the moons of Jupiter like a string of pearls. Through a bigger telescope I see the Large Magellanic Cloud, with

30 billion shimmering stars. Next month, Unesco begins selecting the planet's first **World Heritage Starlight Reserves**, the first time a World Heritage site is not physically on earth. Mount John's night sky is one of the favourites, worthy of official protection from light pollution. newzealandsky.com



Brett Atkinson is the author of six Lonely Planet guides including *Thailand*, *New Zealand*, *Turkey* and *Sri Lanka*



SKY AT NIGHT MAGAZINE PRESENTS... THE BEST PLACES FOR SEEING STARS

Nepal

In the Himalayas you'll be closer to the stars than anywhere else on earth and the thin atmosphere creates exceptional clarity.

Namibia

The remote deserts of the least densely populated country on earth have cloudless skies untouched by light pollution.

New Mexico, USA

Boasting some of the world's darkest night skies, the state even has a special observatory-equipped resort.

Tromsø, Norway

Night skies in the Arctic Circle often play host to the aurora borealis. The city of Tromsø is a favourite for aurora hunters in winter.

Galloway Forest Park, Scotland

Galloway Forest Park was made the first European International Dark Sky Park in November 2009.

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