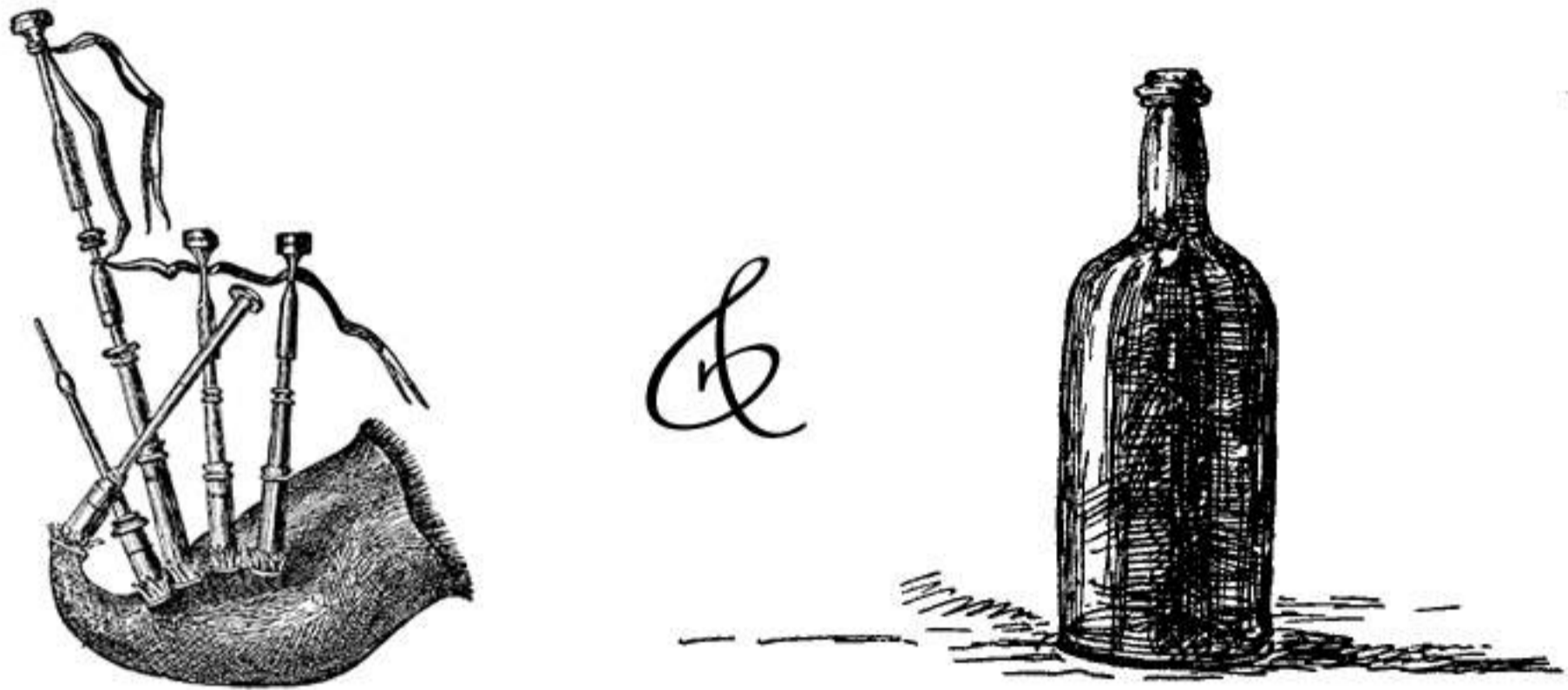


November 22, 2010

BAGPIPES AND BOOZE

ENJOYING SCOTCH IN SCOTLAND

By Jen Pollack Bianco

 2  0

TAGS: EUROPE, HOTELS IN EDINBURGH, LOWLANDS, SCOTCH, SCOTLAND, WHISKEY

I'm married to a Scotch man. Not a Scotsman, mind you. There were no kilts or bagpipes at our wedding. In fact, he was pretty happy with Miller Genuine Draft back then. But as my friends started subscribing to 'Wine Spectator' and spending weekends at Napa vineyards, I wound up touring whisky bars and distilleries. As a side effect, I've gotten cozy with the

*charming sheep-filled country of Scotland, and its laid-back **capital of Edinburgh**. It's friendly, quietly stylish, and just a pleasant train ride away from London on the Flying Scotsman.*

Edinburgh erupts with life every August, during festival season. "The Edinburgh Festival" is a collective term for three separate happenings: the military-centric Tattoo festival; the cultural and arts-focused Edinburgh Festival; and its alternative alter ego, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The Fringe claims to be the world's largest arts festival and has no entry requirement. This means anything goes — all kinds of experimental events are allowed. My last trip to Edinburgh coincided with the Fringe, and it's the perfect time to take a stroll down The Royal Mile to people watch and browse for booze.

Even sober the line between art and life is blurry at the Fringe, but as far I could tell, everyone seemed to be having a good time. Street performers, artists, musicians, and all kinds of alternative art performances take place on all over Edinburgh. I saw a Buddhist monk struggling to haul a fuchsia suitcase over the medieval cobblestone street past a feather-filled zorb. I have no idea if the monk was part of the performance or just looking for a cab. When the streets got too wacky, there was always a pub or whisky shop nearby to seek solace.

Scotland is divided into five distinct single malt regions: Highlands, Lowlands, Speyside, Islay, and Cambeltown. You can take a whistle-stop tour of all of them in specialist malt whiskey retailer Royal Mile Whiskies, followed by a good pub crawl. The friendly staffers at Royal Mile will hook you up with something from their well-edited selection that works for your budget, and show you a few rare, gorgeous bottles reserved for advanced Scotch drinkers willing to pay for the best.

Despite my notorious lightweight status as a drinker, I've learned you don't have to actually imbibe whisky to enjoy it. Scotch is interesting stuff. Ranging in color from pale straw to mahogany, it's pretty to look at. Its bouquet ranges from fruity to deep, lingering caramel. My nose has gotten savvy enough to differentiate between the pete-rich, smoky-sweet distinctive signature of Talisker and the velvety mellow vanilla and leather chair notes of a 40-year-old Macallan — which smells so delicious that your nose knows instinctively that it would be insulted by the presence of an ice cube.

My afternoon ended at the chic bar at the **Hotel Missoni**, where I enjoyed a satisfying whiff (and tiny sip) of my husband's Scotch before turning to my tippie of choice, Hendrick's gin and tonic with cucumber. As it turns out, my favorite gin is distilled in Scotland.

*Jen Pollack Bianco is a Los Angeles-based writer and photographer. Follow Jen on Twitter at **@LAX2NRT**.*

November 30, 2010

CABO: TEQUILA & TIMESHARES

BAJA'S BIG SELL

By Jen Pollack Bianco



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6 COMMENTS

TAGS: BEACHES, CABO SAN LUCAS, MEXICO, TEQUILA

*When you're passionate about travel there's a certain expectation about where you're going next. Your peers expect you to say something like "I'm off to Bhutan for a yoga retreat" or "I'm checking out some cool agriturismo in Tuscany." But after spending four months living out of a suitcase and going on amazing and meaningful trips, I needed a vacation from all the travel, and there was only one place I wanted to go: **Cabo**.*



Every trip to Cabo comes guaranteed with two things: first, you will be offered tequila; second, someone will attempt to sell you a timeshare. Quite often these things are offered in tandem, and tequila and timeshares do not mix. But if you can run the gauntlet from the baggage claim area at the San Jose del Cabo airport to the taxi stand without agreeing to tour a timeshare (usually in exchange for a "free" tequila tasting and a complementary ride to your hotel), you're in for a good time.

Cabo has delicious food and hospitable people, and hotels at every price point. It's a popular spot for destination weddings, and for good reason. It's easy to get to from most anywhere in the States, and the change of time zones is minimal, which makes jet lag a non-issue. Plus, the weather is almost always beautiful.

This time I checked into **Capella Pedregal**, a stunning cliffside resort within walking distance to the marina. As soon as I arrived at the hotel, I ordered a margarita and guacamole. Once I squeezed the lime wedge into my drink, I began to chillax. For some reason I will never understand, the limes in Mexico are vastly superior to those north of the border.

There is plenty to do in Cabo. Golf courses galore, ATV adventures, parasailing, snorkeling, and sunset cruises are all readily available. I chose to do none of it. My goal was to turn my brain off for a couple of days. So I played in the surf, soaked up some sun, read a book and learned far more about tequila than I ever intended.

The bartenders were experts on the Mexican spirit, kind of like tequila sommeliers. They taught me the difference between *blanco*, *reposado*, *añejo* and *extra añejo* tequila. Sadly, much of this interesting information was promptly forgotten once I started sampling the stuff. There is a reason they don't serve tequila on airplanes—it can be heady stuff. As my bar tab grew I began feeling really, really fabulous! I made new friends. Of course I insisted on buying them tequila. I would have bought a timeshare if anyone offered to sell me one in the infinity pool.

Instead I opted for a long siesta and then headed over to the Auriga spa, where my masseuse clearly had experience with tequila overdoses. I emerged blissed out. Rumor has it that the key to avoiding a tequila hangover is to drink only the good stuff.

Even the most adventurous of global nomads need their batteries recharged once in a while, and Cabo is always there ready and willing to help.



Jen Pollack Bianco is a Los Angeles-based writer and photographer. Follow Jen on Twitter at @LAX2NRT.

January 25, 2011

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

CHÂTEAU DE BAGNOLS IN PICTURES

Imagery by Jen Pollack Bianco



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TAGS: CHÂTEAU DE BAGNOLS, IN PICTURES, JEN POLLACK BIANCO, PHOTO ESSAY, RELATED

*When a dozen sweet photographs of a wedding in a French château arrive in your inbox, you say yes. Jen Pollack Bianco sent us these stills, shot on her Diana while visiting the *Château de Bagnols* in Beaujolais, and kindly answered a few of our questions about the trip.*

What's the best thing about destination weddings?

The communal sense of adventure.

Approximately how many bottles of wine did you enjoy during your trip to Beaujolais?

Quite a few! But it was a team effort.

What are some delicious things you ate?

Cherries I picked from the orchard & stinky cheese.

What fictional character do you think would be the most at home at the Chateau de Bagnols?

The talented Mr. Ripley. He'd pay his bill with someone else's credit card.

June 11, 2011

HOUSE RULES

HONG KONG & THE UPPER HOUSE IN PICTURES

Text By Jen Pollack Bianco / Photos By Rebecca Adler Rotenberg



The lawn and "secret garden" are tucked away on the sixth floor for guests to discover.

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ONE COMMENT

TAGS: [HOTELS IN HONG KONG](#), [IN PICTURES](#), [OZONE](#), [UPPER HOUSE](#)

*I've yet to meet a hotel in Hong Kong that I didn't like, and the service is always great. But when I recently checked in to the **Upper House** in Pacific Place, I found myself tempted to move in. Architect Andre Fu designed the House to be an urban oasis for its guests, removed from the bustle of the busy city below. The Upper House is a green property — literally and figuratively. In addition to keeping paper use to minimum and having a fleet of Lexus Hybrids (equipped with wifi), the hotel boasts a secret garden with a large grassy lawn on the sixth floor. The property has everything you'd expect from a great business hotel, but it goes beyond that. It's a sublimely sexy place, with suites so spacious you're tempted not to leave, and enormous glass windows with impressive views that made me feel like I was floating. The enormous bathrooms had me daydreaming about planning my next stay, when I hope to bring my husband along.*

Jen Pollack Bianco is an Los Angeles-based **writer and photographer** who travels frequently with friend and fellow **photographer**, Rebecca Adler Rotenberg.



DESIGN, CULTURE & TRAVEL INSPIRATIONS *from* TABLET HOTELS



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June 26, 2011

JUST A MOMENT

LIQUID COURAGE AT THE RITZ



19



14

TAGS: [HOTELS IN PARIS](#), [JUST A MOMENT](#), [THE RITZ](#)

"I meet the most interesting people in hotel bars. At Bar Hemingway, I met an Argentine mixologist named Matias Merlot. He drank a beer."

— Jen Pollack Bianco at *The Ritz* in Paris



DESIGN, CULTURE & TRAVEL INSPIRATIONS *from* TABLET HOTELS



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May 8, 2011

JUST A MOMENT

WADING TIME



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TAGS: [HOTELS IN MEXICO](#), [JUST A MOMENT](#), [MEXICO](#)

"I had spent the day at the beach and was walking back to my room when I snapped this picture. Even right next to the ocean, a delicious swimming pool like this one is hard to resist."

— Jen Pollack Bianco at The Tides Zihuatanejo

August 31, 2010

MAGIC CARPET RIDE

SHOPPING FOR THE ULTIMATE SOUVENIR

Story and Photographs by Jen Pollack Bianco



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TAGS: AFRICA, DECOR, FES, FURNISHINGS, MARRAKECH, MOROCCO, SHOPPING

“For you, special price,” the carpet salesman told me. I didn’t believe him for a second, and I had been duly warned — if you go to Morocco, you will return with a carpet. My tour guide in Marrakech led me into a carpet store at a moment when I needed a respite from the sun, and he heard the call to prayer. As I stepped into the shop I was handed a glass of mint tea and the store workers led me down the stairs to a lair of beautiful rugs.



The carpet show that followed was highly entertaining. Moroccan carpet salesmen are some of the most charming and friendly people on the planet. Sales assistants unrolled multiple tribal rugs for me to see, and quickly nailed my taste. The rugs that didn’t do it for me immediately disappeared from view. My mint tea was constantly refreshed and I found myself really enjoying the whole experience. Who knew I had such strong opinions about carpets? Ten minutes into the show, one rug stood out to me. When I asked hold old it was, I was given the extremely vague answer: “Last century.” Before long I was haggling over the price of a beautiful orange carpet most likely woven in 1999.

I am not a good haggler. The whole process makes me highly uncomfortable. Never do I want to insult the vendor, nor do I want to pay the “tourista price” and feel like a sucker later. I knew enough to let the salesman throw out the first number. He suggested a price higher than I was I was willing to go but not out of striking distance. After a few minutes of back and forth, I knew that the rug was coming home with me, and so did the salesman. Rather than drag out the negotiations, I shook hands once he named a price that I could live with. I signed my name on the back of the rug with

a marker so I would know the correct rug was shipped to me. The assistants folded and wrapped the carpet and hand-stitched the package with surgical precision while I paid the bill.

I was extremely pleased with my new purchase — until I walked into the gift shop at Amanjena. They had a very similar rug for sale for a couple hundred dollars less than I had just paid. I had a laugh about it, and my “sucker’s remorse” disappeared the second I returned home and unrolled it on the floor of my den. It really ties the room together.

A few years older and (presumably) wiser I returned to Morocco, this time to Fez, the country’s handicraft capital. With over 5,000 labyrinthine streets and alleys barely wide enough for two donkeys to pass, Fez’s medieval medina is best seen with a local guide. Taking in the sights and sounds of this ancient souk, which sells everything from snails to Shakira CDs, Morocco once again seduced me. I bought a pair of leather slippers and admired Fassi pottery. When I told my guide I needed to find a bathroom, he lead me to a spotless one — in a carpet store.

Again a cup of mint tea was thrust into my hands. And then the rugs started flying. Since I knew I wasn’t coming home with another rug, I decided watching for a few minutes was the polite thing to do before claiming poverty and making a graceful exit. Then two very different rugs caught my eye: one reversible silk, the other tribal. I asked how much the salesman wanted for the silk rug and he threw out a number that was shockingly high. He made me walk on the rug and asked which side I liked better? Stroking the carpet, and loving both sides, I told him I didn’t have enough cash on me. The salesman was happy to take the money I had as a deposit, and have my tour guide bring back the rest from **Riad Fès**, where I was staying. My guide would bring me the receipt tomorrow. A good solution, I thought, because I could walk away without asking a single question about the other beautiful rug I had admired.



The next day my guide showed me more of Fez and around noon he mentioned he forgot to pick up my receipt. “Let’s go get it right now,” he said. We turned a few corners and I barely noticed that once again, I had stepped into Aladdin’s crack den of carpets. While the salesman got my receipt, a more experienced “closer” chatted me up while the sales assistants unfurled the other rug that I admired yesterday. The closer was exceptionally good. He assured me that since I had bought a carpet yesterday he could offer me an exceptional deal on this rug. “For you, special price!” Curious, I asked to see the store’s sales ledger and he showed it to me. I was shocked to discover that the shop only sold two or three of these beautiful carpets per week. He threw out a number for the second rug, and I volleyed back with an unbelievably

low counter-offer. The closer shocked me by accepting it.

One of those carpets is now in the entryway of my home and I smile every time I see it. The other is still wrapped up, because I’m a little embarrassed about being the sucker who bought three. Magic carpets actually do exist. I know for a fact the ones in Morocco make cash disappear from your wallet.

We’ve got thirty-five extraordinary Moroccan hotels to choose from, including twenty-seven in Marrakech alone.

Jen Pollack Bianco is a Los Angeles-based writer and photographer. Follow Jen on Twitter at @LAX2NRT.

October 19, 2010

SOUTH AMERICAN IDOLS

EXPLORING EASTER ISLAND

By Jen Pollack Bianco



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2 COMMENTS

TAGS: EASTER ISLAND, SOUTH AMERICA, STATUES, TOURISM, UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

The pyramids at Giza. The Great Wall of China. The Taj Mahal. UNESCO World Heritage sites are almost universally hot travel destinations, and with that distinction comes the nuisance of modern day crowds. As a seasoned traveler I like to believe that crowds no longer faze me. I've grown to expect the throngs of tourists, the tour bus traffic, and the self-loathing I feel in hypocritically despising their presence.

Recently I found myself on Easter Island, standing amongst the iconic moai statues that have been the centerfolds of thousands of glossy travel magazines. This time the crowds surprised me — because there weren't any. A combination of geographic isolation and timing — my trip came just weeks after a major earthquake hit Chile and tourists, myself included, cancelled or rescheduled plans en masse — allowed me to come face-to-giant-face with these icons. And I pretty much had them all to myself.

Easter Island is, from a tourism point of view, is geographically undesirable. It is the most isolated inhabited place on the planet. It's a five-hour flight from Santiago, Chile or Papeete, Tahiti. Known also as Rapa Nui and Isla de Pascua, the tiny (66-square-mile) speck of a volcanic island is mostly barren. But Easter Island punches well above its weight in world-class travel allure.

Its remote location is the island's greatest blessing and biggest curse. Limited flight schedules and the National Park status that covers a third of the island pretty much guarantee it is never going to be overdeveloped by major hotel chains. And while flight poses logistical difficulties for visitors, it's a far less daunting trip than the one undertaken by the intrepid eighth-century Polynesian sailors who found it in the first place.



PHOTO: JEN BIANCO

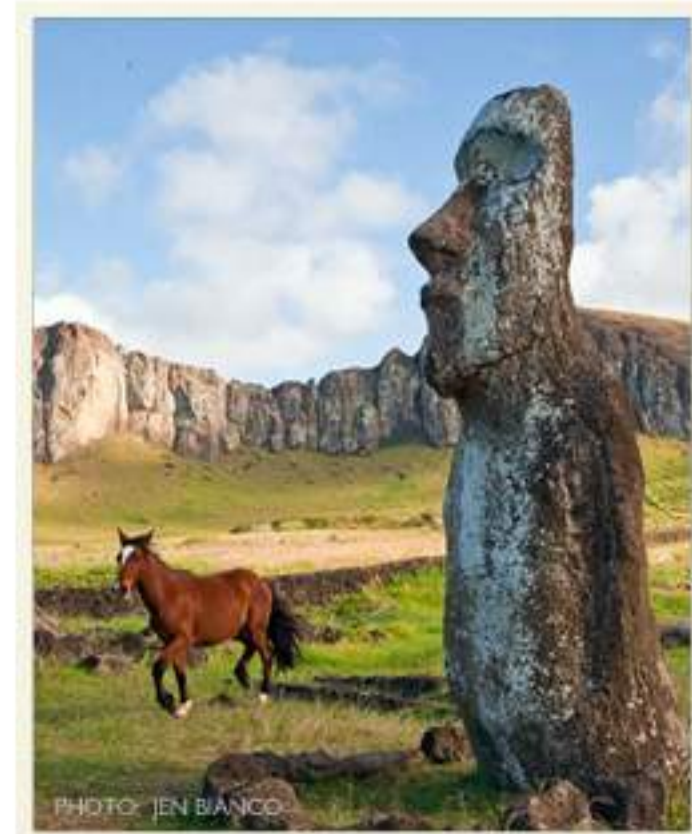


PHOTO: JEN BIANCO

The Rapa Nui people, five thousand strong, mix elements of Polynesian tradition with South American custom. Unlike so many other exotic destinations where the locals play up ancient rituals for the benefit of tourists, Rapa Nui culture is the real deal. During the annual Tapati festival locals, clad in loincloths and body paint, race down the slope of an extinct volcano on sleds made from banana fronds. To be allowed to participate in it is a great honor, and one the Islanders take very seriously.

Easter Island's biggest draw, aside from its enigmatic statues, is its undeniable soul. There's a spirit of genuine place that can be felt everywhere — in the surf, in the tribal customs, in the pride of its people when they talk about competing in the "banana triathlon," or even just pour you a pisco sour. Standing among the island's mysterious moai statues, I can't say I missed the crowds. But I did find myself wishing more people could visit this amazing place. Maybe there's room for a bus or two.

*Editor's note: it's not entirely a coincidence that we've recently added an **Easter Island hotel** to our listings: the incomparable **Explora Rapa Nui**.*

Jen Pollack Bianco is a Los Angeles-based writer and photographer. Follow Jen on Twitter at @LAX2NRT.