



Palace Coups

Two revitalized Spanish grande dames stake their claims in a new golden age of travel. BY LAURIE KAHLE



From top:
Hotel María Cristina,
Hotel Alfonso XIII

B Bold colors, grand archways, silk curtains, antique furnishings, marble floors, hand-painted walls, velvet chairs. Spain is a country whose richness in decoration and style is well-matched by its richness in history. It is fitting, then, that a new golden age of travel would begin in a place with so much to offer.

Two of Spain's grandest and most glorious landmarks, the Hotel Alfonso XIII and the Hotel María Cristina, both Luxury Collection Hotels, are fearlessly emerging as stakeholders in this travel age as they have now seen ren-

ovations that blend the glamorous with the modern, the traditional with the innovative, the old with the new.

Pepe Torezano's stories about the decades he spent working as head concierge at Seville's Hotel Alfonso XIII offer a glimpse of a bygone era when Hollywood royalty and cultural nobility made the rounds to Europe's opulent grande dame hotels. He recalls the dramatic antics of the cast and crew of the 1962 epic film *Lawrence of Arabia*, when they stayed at the hotel for months while filming on-site and at local landmarks. Torezano's recollections



Hotel Alfonso XIII



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Hotel Alfonso XIII's grand lobby; Bodega Alfonso tapas bar; the ornate Salón Real Ballroom; the Royal Suite; detail of the staircase



gave historical context at the grand reopening of the Seville landmark last summer, following an extensive redesign and restoration under the direction of local architect Demopolis and the English firm HBA/Hirsch Bedner Associates.

Sevillian architect José Espiau y Muñoz originally designed the structure with Arabic-inspired arches, soaring towers, and Renaissance-style windows for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition. The Luxury Collection Hotels & Resorts, which is part of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, invested 10 months and \$25 million restoring the King Alfonso XIII to its former grandeur, but with a fresh and timely undercurrent. The Alfonso's return to Seville's hotel scene was soon followed by the reopening of its renovated sister property, the Hotel Maria Cristina, named for King Alfonso's mother and located in Spain's culinary capital, San Sebastian.

"When we started the project, we didn't see the connection," says Inge Moore, principal at HBA London, who concedes that both properties were badly in need of a facelift. "The Alfonso was such a masculine building, and Seville is all about masculine, bold colors. We needed to get some soul into the hotel and place it in the context of the city," she explains, noting the transformation of the Bodega Alfonso tapas bar, where they painted the cream walls a deep Spanish red and restored the original moldings and tiles.

Architects redesigned the Alfonso's 151 rooms and suites in Moorish, Castilian, and Andalusian styles featuring custom furnishings and indigenous tile work that evoke the city's rich history. The Royal Suite, where Bruce Springsteen stayed while on tour last summer, boasts a number of antiques, including a *bargueño*, a Spanish Renaissance cabinet inlaid with mother-of-pearl that was a gift from the hotel's former owner, the Aga Khan.

Meanwhile, the common spaces, which surround an atrium courtyard, reclaim their original splendor with restored hand-painted Triana and Mensaque ceramic tiles, authentic wood-carved furnishings, and marble floors. Local artisans restored hand-painted wall panels and

the ornate coffered plaster ceiling of the Salón Real Ballroom, now containing Bohemian-inspired crystal-and-bronze chandeliers and a new wrought-iron door referencing Andalusian cathedrals.

"This hotel reminds us what's important about travel and how great hotels add something to the destinations they live in," says Paul James, global brand leader for St. Regis and The Luxury Collection. "This hotel is in the heart of the city of Seville and has always celebrated the excitement of the place. The opportunity to bring it back and restore it for a new generation of travelers is something that doesn't present itself to many companies very often."

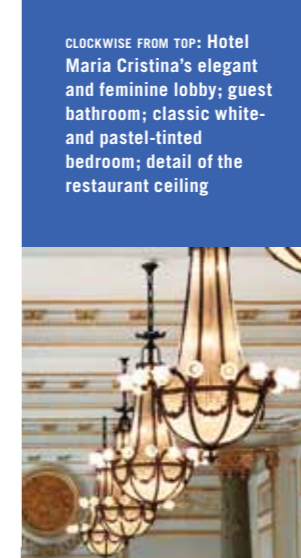
In stark contrast to Alfonso's macho presence, the Hotel Maria Cristina, which opened in 1912, exudes art nouveau curves and femininity. The high ceilings, moldings, tall marble pillars, and Carrara marble floors of the public spaces are tempered by champagne-hued walls, plush velvet upholstery, and hand-tufted wool rugs in shades of warm mocha and copper. The 107 guest rooms are bathed in pastel tints — grey, lavender, sky blue — combined with gilded accents, tufted headboards, and white moldings. A chocolate-infused palette adds drama to the 29 suites, including the corner suites with rounded rooms overlooking the ocean. These rooms feature photos of glamour icons who stayed at the hotel in the first half of the 20th century; each image is accompanied by a quote from the woman pictured. For example, a portrait of Bette Davis is labeled with the line: "There comes a time in every woman's life when the only thing that helps is a glass of champagne."

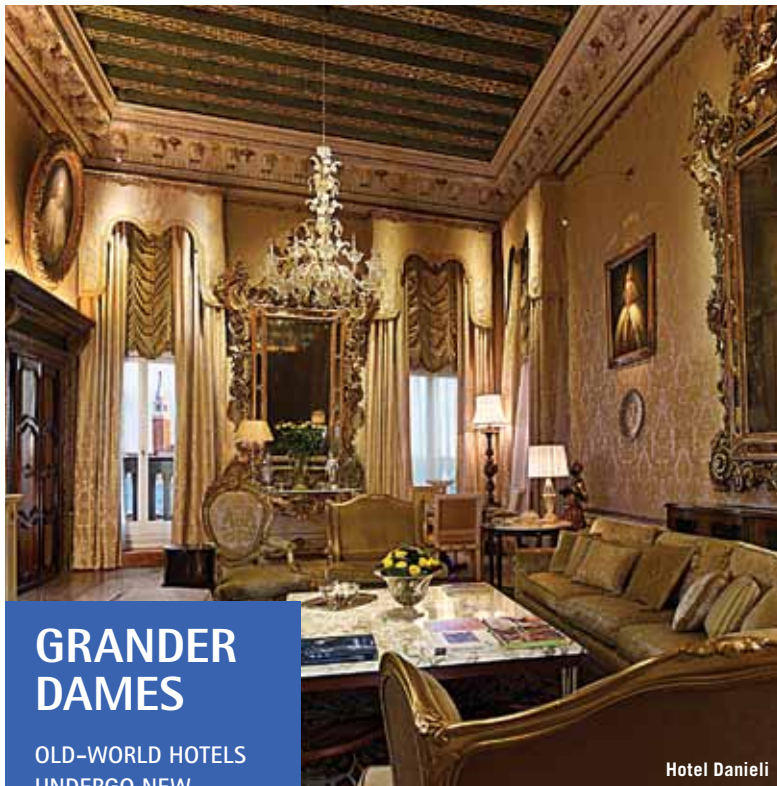
Unlike a new hotel with standardized rooms, these antique structures with their varying room configurations pose particular design challenges for space planning because a cookie-cutter approach to design will not work. Despite the obstacles involved, rejuvenating a landmark property has fulfilling rewards. "There are not many of these buildings in the world, so it's fabulous to be able to restore such special places," Moore says. "It's much more



Hotel Maria Cristina

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Hotel Maria Cristina's elegant and feminine lobby; guest bathroom; classic white- and pastel-tinted bedroom; detail of the restaurant ceiling





GRANDER DAMES

OLD-WORLD HOTELS UNDERGO NEW-WORLD UPDATES

Hotel Danieli

THE GRITTI PALACE in Venice recently reopened after being completely transformed under the direction of Donghia Design. The new decor highlights rare archival fabrics from the leading Venetian textile houses and an array of new and original chandeliers and glassware from Murano. hotelgrittipalacevenice.com

HOTEL DANIELI in Venice tapped designer Pierre-Yves Rochon to lead a total refurbishment and redesign of the four suites in the 14th-century Palazzo Dandolo building. Restored in spring 2012, the new suites include the Royal Suite del Doge renovated in collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts of Venice and three Signature Suites devoted to Maria Callas, Princess Grace Kelly, and Greta Garbo. danielihotelvenice.com

THE RITZ PARIS closed last summer for a two-year restoration under the auspices of designer Thierry Despont. In addition to refreshing the decor, the renovation will modernize the hotel's infrastructure. The number of rooms will be slightly reduced, and the adjacent gardens are being restored to their original 1898 splendor for a planned summer 2014 reopening. ritzparis.com

HÔTEL PLAZA ATHÉNÉE in Paris, which marks its 100th anniversary this year, recently unveiled its new Royal Suite by designer Marie José Pommerau. The four-bedroom suite with balconies overlooking Avenue Montaigne and views of the Eiffel Tower has been modernized with cutting-edge media technology and outfitted in a color scheme of apricot, raspberry, violet, beige, and mauve. plaza-athenee-paris.com

THE DORCHESTER in London debuted 22 new suites in fall 2012 that were redesigned in classic British style by Alexandra Champalimaud, who also oversaw the fall 2011 redesign of the Hotel Bel-Air. thedorchester.com — L.K.

exciting to stay in these wonderful old properties, especially now that they are equipped for the modern traveler.”

Starwood's James agrees, noting that he has observed a global trend of travelers craving old-world glamour in addition to demanding state-of-the-art amenities and five-star service. “It's the dawn of a new golden age of travel,” he says, referencing the vintage photographs of Hollywood icons such as Grace Kelly or Elizabeth Taylor that grace the walls of the rooms. “People are looking for that elegance and sophistication, which needs a grand setting. And the great thing about the tiny world we are living in today is that it is not restricted to 20 people living in Hollywood. People the world over are investing in these kinds of experiences.”



Hôtel Plaza Athénée