

Two new books about famous hotels let readers check in on history

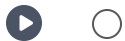
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Representing both home and the world, the foreign and the familiar, the hotel has always been a paradoxical space. In 1929, the German Jewish writer Joseph Roth – a self-described “hotel citizen” and exile from the collapsing Austro-Hungarian world – memorably called the lobby of his favourite hotel “my ancestorless gallery.”

Ralph Fiennes’s character in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the concierge Gustave H., expresses a similar sentiment, albeit in a more comic register, when he praises the film’s titular hotel as one of the “faint glimmers of civilization left in this barbaric slaughterhouse once known as humanity.”

Both those sentiments are much in evidence in two recent nonfiction books – Lyse Doucet’s **The Finest Hotel in Kabul (Allen Lane, 448 pgs)** and Jane Rogoyska’s **Hotel Exile (Knopf Canada, 360 pgs)** – that use a single hotel to



Lyse Doucet, the Canadian-born BBC journalist and author of *The Finest Hotel in Kabul*.

PAULA BRONSTEIN/SUPPLIED

Doucet tells her “people’s history of Afghanistan” not through presidents, generals, or warlords – though all those types eventually show up – but through the lives of the staff at the Inter-Continental Kabul. Perched high on a hill above the city once known as the “Paris of Central Asia,” Afghanistan’s first five-star luxury hotel has offered, at times literally, a front-row seat to history. Rather than attempting a panoramic account of the country’s turbulent past,

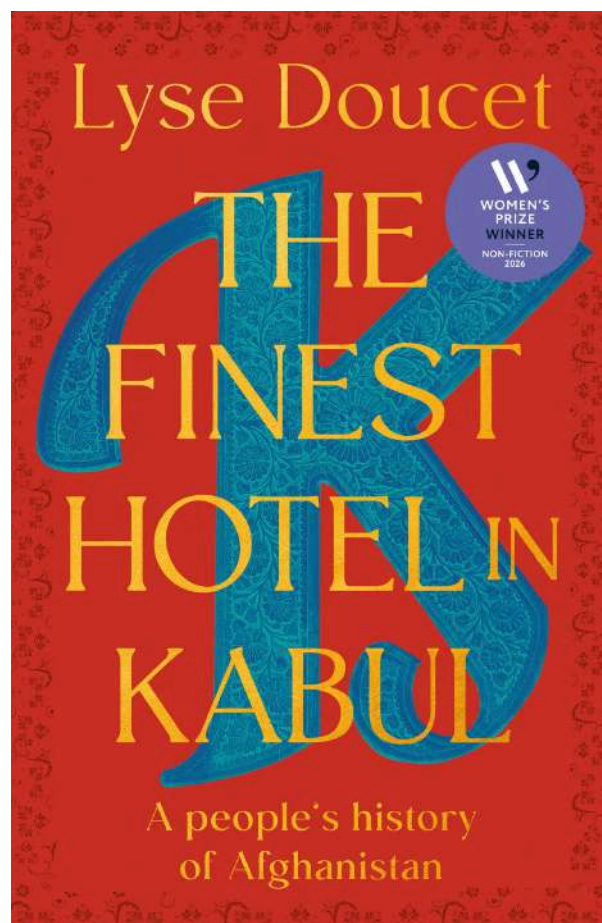
Andrea Gunraj's non-fiction debut explores 'undertold' legacy of indentured labour

The approach works beautifully. Like one of those locked-off nature cams, we follow the comings and goings of staff, journalists, diplomats and travellers as they pass through the hotel, the broader story of Afghanistan emerging through their intersecting lives.

A BBC correspondent then as now, the Canadian-born journalist spent nearly a year living in the Inter-Con – as it became known after the hotel chain disowned it following the Soviet invasion – while covering the Red Army's withdrawal in the late 1980s. (If the book has a flaw, it's Doucet's slightly odd decision to write the brief passages where she herself appears in third person.)

A brutalist rectangle emblematic of late 1960s corporate modernism, with a sweeping view of the Hindu Kush, the Inter-Con was built at a time when Afghanistan's future seemed particularly bright. For its local and international staff, it offered stable employment and a sense of possibility.

Doucet introduces us to several of the latter as they endure, with stoicism and grace, the country's ever-changing political fortunes and the hotel's slow descent into decrepitude. After Afghanistan's monarchy ends in 1973 with the king's ouster by his cousin, bringing to a close one of the most stable periods in the country's modern history, the hotel's walls become a revolving gallery of presidential portraits



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The Inter-Con stands as a symbol of Afghanistan's modernizing ambitions for just five years. Thereafter, it bears witness to a long succession of coups, putsches, revolutions and violence. Particularly poignant is Doucet's rendering of the two-decade interval between the driving out of the Taliban and their subsequent return to power after almost 20 years, a time when many Afghans, particularly women, dared to hope that the country's darkest chapter had finally ended.

These reversals are registered in the everyday particulars of hotel life: the smashing of televisions and "objectionable" art, the silencing of music, the banning of alcohol from the hotel's now misnamed brasserie.

The result is a history less political than human, one that brings both clarity and emotional resonance to a nation too often reduced to tragic headlines and geopolitics.

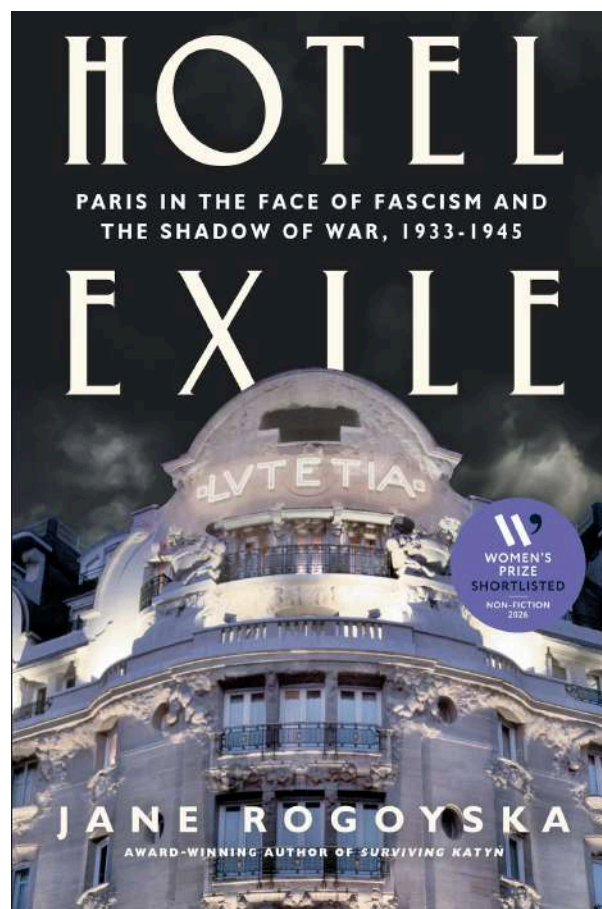


The hotel at the heart of Jane Rogoyska's account of Paris before, during and immediately after the Second World War is the Hotel Lutetia, a grand Left Bank institution whose sinuous façade marks the transition from Art Nouveau and Art Deco (like so many historic luxury hotels, it has since been subsumed by a Hong Kong-based multinational and rebranded the Mandarin Oriental Lutetia).

Unlike in Doucet's book, where we rarely stray far from the Inter-Con, Rogoyska's narrative ranges freely across Paris, tracing the city's descent into war and occupation before returning, again and again, to the Lutetia. A former concierge described the hotel not as "an actor in a drama," but rather as "the stage on which dramas are played out," and Rogoyska adopts much the same approach. Her elegant present-tense prose lends the narrative both immediacy and foreboding. We know what is coming; her characters do not.

The guests change over time, but the hotel remains. In the 1930s, its bars and cafés fill with artists, intellectuals and politicians, among them James Joyce (who lived there for two months), Ernest Hemingway, and a young Charles de Gaulle. It also becomes a gathering place for German communists and anti-Nazi activists seeking refuge from Hitler's regime.

After the fall of France, the hotel is commandeered by Germany's military intelligence service, the Abwehr. Its French staff are allowed to stay on, and they continue to perform their duties with a professionalism that, in their eyes, sets them above their unwanted guests.



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After liberation, the Lutetia becomes a repatriation centre for Holocaust survivors and deported French citizens. Tens of thousands pass through its doors as anxious family members consult lists of survivors posted outside.

Messy, inspiring and tragic, Rogoyska's story seems to unfold in wrenching real time. We meet citizens, collaborators and resisters, but above all, exiles. These include not just refugees and survivors, but Abwehr officers, for whom the hotel's champagne, cognac and gourmet meals eventually lose their allure. After two years of occupation, they too yearn for home.

Rogoyska documents several acts of resistance, but none more quintessentially French than that carried out by the Lutetia's staff, who at one point built a false wall in the hotel's cellar to hide its finest wines.

The barbarians may be at the gate, but civilization, in the form of a good Burgundy, will always be worth defending.

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