

Hotel Casablanca

By Derek Workman



As I drove into Gaucin after a long sticky drive, all I wanted was a shower and half an hour's flop on a comfy bed. I was looking for the Hotel Casablanca but, unlike in the Bible, unto me did not come a sign. I struggled through the tiny streets, asking a chap leaning against a van if he knew where the street I was looking for was. He confidently

wooden door swung open I was hit head on with such a glorious feast of decadence that I felt as if I'd strayed onto the set of a Frederico Fellini film.

"Derek Workman, we thought you'd never arrive. We were wondering what happened to you." That was Enrique, a dapper chap who immediately took my bags and

from a central patio, in this case with a swimming pool, lawns and a splendidly chi-chi little alcove where a smartly dressed couple were taking an aperitivo before dinner.

I was welcomed by Berte Morisot who, far from being another member of staff, was an impressionist painter in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, sister-in-law of the more famous Manet. That's how you know your room, not by the number, but by the name of a famous artist, so you might stay in the Gauguin (Paul), with its spectacular views of the mountains, Gibraltar, the Mediterranean and Morocco, and which comes complete with its own private sun-terrace and whirlpool spa, Picasso (Pablo), a quirky room on two levels, or Monet (Claude) with its king-size bed and private balcony, where you can linger over breakfast in total privacy - in either of them. In all, there are nine rooms, each in a different style, but all equally sybaritic and sumptuous.

As I'd arrive later than expected, Berte had to wait a while to become closer acquainted, while I took my drink on the roof-top terrace in the fading rays of the sun, with its stunning vista over village roof tops, on to the Med and Gibraltar and, hovering in the distance like a shimmering mirage, the shores of Morocco and the Riff mountains.

For most of its life Hotel Casablanca was a private residence, until it was converted into a hotel ten years ago. Seven years later it was sold to a British couple who at first intended to use it as a holiday home, but wisely decided to add three bedrooms and totally upgrade it to the luxury that now greets visitors. The style is splendidly rococo-ish, with rustic influences and large helpings of Moroccan plushness. It's the sort of place that you just can't help photographing to give you ideas

for your next house make-over, but somehow it's unlikely that it will work in the darker reaches of Surrey. You need the abundant southern light that floods the hotel to do that.

Having made full use of the lush Gilchrist and Soames toiletries, (it was too late to have a splash in the pool so I had a soak in a deep perfumed bath instead) I dined in a light breeze wafting over the terrace. The oh-so posh plush velvet and burnished wood dining room was full, but the peacefulness of the terrace with its greenery and hanging lanterns suited me perfectly and gave me the opportunity to watch the comings and goings of other guests and of being lulled by the soothing ambience of the music, which drifted from light flamenco, to Parisian café, and on through a delightful mix of styles and rhythms that perfectly suited the evening. The tassels on the Moorish umbrellas swayed and tinkled in the breeze, and as daylight faded the glow from the Moroccan lamps spread, warming the night with their twinkling coloured glass panels.

Enrique and his equally ebullient colleague, Sue, chatted with the guests, explaining a dish here, or recommending something



and preparing it for the subtle delights to come.

Through duck, crisp skinned with pale pink interior, roasted with pickled cherries and served with a gelee of honey and rosemary;

absolutely superb with the smooth texture of a refined turrón, rather than the iced granular texture usually associated with sorbet. With coffee came a tiny milkshake made with Galician herb liqueur, white chocolate fudge, and truffles with Drambuie. A superb evening of relaxed but elegant ambience, attentive but not over effusive staff, and the gastronomy of a master. A restaurant critic's heaven!

After a long day my king size bed welcomed me like an island of dreams. With no other sound than the slight swishing of the palms in the garden outside my window, I gave in entirely to the enveloping arms of Morpheus, trying not to think that I had an early start the next morning and that it was no-one's fault but my own that I'd arrived late and not been able to fully enjoy the delights of the Casablanca as much as I would have liked. I'll certainly be early next time!

For further information on the Hotel Casablanca visit their web page at www.casablancagaucin.com, or call 95 215 10 19.

Derek Workman visited the Hotel Casablanca with An Amazing Hotel. www.anamazinghotel.com, Tel. 659 734 684.



gave me directions which I followed, only to arrive back in front of him ten minutes later. "Where exactly are you looking for?" he asked. "The Hotel Casablanca," I told him. "That's it there, right in front of you. You should have asked for it first time around." God bless him, he was completely right; I'd got the address wrong.

I parked and went into what looked more like an elegant private home than a hotel, but as the big

offered me a drink, which was more than my mum ever did when she addressed me in similar words but in a far more strident tone of voice. Sweeping aside my mumbling about having mounds of luggage to bring in, he took my car keys and said he'd sort that out and park my car for me in their garage. If I never got beyond reception, I was suitably impressed.

The house was originally the home of a Marquesa, but in typical Moorish style, the rooms radiate



special there. And using first names - it's their way of helping you feel at home.

In the inventive hands of Chef/Director Daniel Hall, ably assisted by sou chef Scott Fraser, the restaurant of the Casablanca is becoming recognised as one of the best in Andalucía. To do full justice to the splendid meal I ate that evening would require an article on its own, but as much as the menu itself was a feast of words, the aperitivos and sweet surprise served with coffee, goes to show how dedicated Daniel and his staff are to creating an awe-inspiring experience.

I'm served with a pizzara, a piece of thick black slate, on which stands a narrow glass of melon ajo blanco, a bright milky-white chilled garlic and almond soup blended with melon, a tiny half-egg shaped heart of palm that has been marinated in orange oil, and a soft smoked salmon and avocado cream. They are delicious, light and refreshing, cleaning the palate

soft and flaky lubina, very slightly crisped, served with tiny chiprones, on a bed of braised rice whose lingering and aromatic flavour was created by blending fennel and saffron, and accompanied by 'fennel in textures', a clever serving of three versions of the vegetable, roast, puree and gelee; on to a dessert of olive oil ice cream with tamarind sorbet, the latter



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