

# Luxe Comes to Lhasa

What's a Hot List hotel doing in a place like Tibet? **Dorinda Elliott** finds a culture fighting to survive—and a Chinese Buddhist hotel owner trying to do the right thing



**SACRED CITY** The St. Regis, looking out on the Potala Palace, where the Dalai Lama once lived, is a 15-minute walk from the Jokhang Temple (inset), Tibet's holiest spot. You can support the local economy and culture by buying Tibetan handicrafts—carpets and handbags—at the Drogenling Handicraft Center, or hats like the one below in the shops near the temple.

**WHEN I SET OUT** to review the St. Regis Resort in Lhasa for this year's annual Hot List of the world's best new hotels (page 82), I had my doubts. It was my first trip back to Tibet since I was sent there by *Newsweek* in 1987 to cover an uprising by monks, and knowing that there had been a brutal crackdown on rioting again in 2008, I wondered how a luxury hotel might fare in such a besieged place.

The magnificent hotel is an homage to Tibetan design, with such modern amenities as heated bathroom floors and private butlers who'll unpack for you (no, thanks!). The spa wasn't open yet (sigh), but I tested the delicate Tibetan petits fours in my room and sampled nouvelle cuisine in the Western restaurant. The presence of luxury here—a 15-minute walk from Tibet's holiest

spot, the Jokhang Temple, where throngs of pilgrims dressed in sheep's wool, coral, and turquoise mingle with nervous young Chinese soldiers in full riot gear—reflects far more than the desire to make a quick buck. Eight years ago, the Hong Kong Chinese (and Tibetan Buddhist) owner of the property, Peter Kwok, and his family went to Tibet on a spiritual pilgrimage. It was a graduation trip for Kwok's son, but "I decided on the spot to do something for the Tibetan people," says Kwok. "Zero due diligence."

High life and high-mindedness need not be a contradiction: Kwok believes that the way to help Tibetans is by offering them training and employment. Fifty percent of his staff are

Tibetan—albeit in the lower echelons—and Kwok says he will increase that to 75 percent this year. In the hotel lobby one afternoon, I asked an eager Tibetan concierge named Frank what he thought about his job. He explained that his nomad parents have no idea what life in Lhasa is like, let alone the luxuries of the St. Regis. "They cannot really understand what I am doing," he said. "But this is a huge opportunity for me. Someday I would like to go to France."

There is no denying the tension between Tibetans and the Han Chinese who have colonized their land. And after the 2008 riots, the Chinese government, suspicious that foreigners were involved, threw out the international organizations that had been trying to preserve Tibetan culture and help the local people. But Tibetans told me that they want foreigners to come, to learn about their culture and spread a little wealth. I did my bit for the economy at the Drogenling Handicraft operation—so much so that I had to have my loot shipped home. Set up by one of the nonprofits that has left, it sells elegant hand-stitched leather bags, carpets made with vegetable dyes, and boxes painted with Tibetan tigers. Big spenders have never had anyplace to stay in Lhasa, and the St. Regis should attract more high-end travelers. That means more employment.

Kwok, meanwhile, has given \$150,000 to establish a fund for Tibetan students who can't afford college. "Look, as for modernization and what that will do to Tibet—that is a very deep philosophical question way over my head, but I want to do something that is right and good," says Kwok. "I can give local people jobs and help improve standards. I am doing what I can."

The St. Regis is gorgeous—that's why it's on the Hot List (and on our cover). But the fact that its owner is trying to do some good makes it that much better. □



**UNDER \$300** **Yi House Art Hotel**  
798, Beijing

Occupying a former crystal factory, this ultra-sleek 30-room hotel was the first to open among the galleries and cafés of the trendy Factory 798 Art District. Surreal photos of Peking Opera characters in nature (by contemporary artist Chi Peng) and funky furniture set the tone: Look for the Mies van der Rohe leather couch and the lime-green sofa in the lobby. At the hotel's Fennel restaurant, the mod-Ming aesthetic (dark brown furniture, chartreuse cushions, and oversized black-and-white photos of Buddhist monks) contrasts with the comforting Mediterranean dishes and hearty breakfasts (the scrumptious house muesli is a meal in itself). The guest rooms and hallways are also a visual treat: A departure from the muted corridors of most contemporary hotels, they're peacock blue, with tribal throw rugs and framed stills from the romantic films of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai. The rooms themselves have light-wood floors; gray, yellow, and white laminate Ming-style closets. **WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** Reserve a Deluxe Suite Double, for its dramatic yellow closet and Chi Peng photo of opera characters in a snowy Forbidden City (86-10-6436-1818; yi-house.com; doubles, \$220-\$282). 🍷 🍷 🍷

**Conrad Sanya Haitang Bay,**  
Hainan Island

86-898-8820-8888; conradhotels.hilton.com; doubles, \$471-\$897. 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

**Four Seasons Hotel Hangzhou at West Lake,**  
Hangzhou

A 90-minute bullet train ride from Shanghai, the Four Seasons is enviably situated right on Hangzhou's West Lake, a spot that has inspired painters and poets for centuries. Winding pathways meander through the 17 acres of landscaped gardens and interconnected lily ponds, making the resort feel like a Zen retreat in a town that is normally rather chaotic. There are only 78 rooms and, though they lack a specifically Chinese sense of place (unlike the common areas and grounds), they're spacious and comfy, with walk-in closets. Staff are very friendly and give plenty of individual attention (one of the concierges, Robert Huang, is an English-speaking gem in a mostly Chinese-speaking city). On-site distractions include an excellent spa, two pools (the indoor one has pavilion-style niches perfect for tête-à-têtes), and two restaurants, including Jin Sha, which specializes in Shanghaiese and regional cuisine. Excursions include tours around the lake on traditional



Jones at Soho House in London.

**HOT HOTELIER****Nick Jones, Soho House Group**

Londoner Nick Jones didn't belong to any club when he started the private Soho House in 1995. He says he was just filling a vacancy upstairs from his Café Bohème restaurant. By following a formula of "glamour and relaxedness," as well as guaranteeing creative types a discreet playpen, he made the place a runaway hit, eventually spawning four additional U.K. outposts. In 2003, a New York City branch debuted, and now Jones has set his sights on the rest of the world. Last year saw new Soho Houses in West Hollywood, Berlin, and Miami, and the last two have hotel rooms as well. In Berlin, "because everything is gray and cold, we warmed up the decor and put in a bit of floral design." Miami "is the South American capital of America, so we've gone Cuban style." Next, Jones is eyeing Chicago and San Francisco. While he labors over decor, food, and staff, the secret to Soho House's success remains the membership base: "Our perfect member is a struggling scriptwriter rather than a flash business guy."

brass, painted steel, and concrete. Intense color pops up here and there in the art, rugs, throw pillows, and playful furniture (like the multicolored wire pods cradling lounge beds for two). The eager-to-please staff provide good service, cheerfully answering the phone with the genie-like phrase "What is your wish?" From your arrival in the resort's dedicated airport lounge, you enter an environment of mixed cocktails, "ambassadors" (butlers lite), and, in the evening, ubiquitous Euro dance music. The 157 rooms, however, promote calm with comfy beds and oversized pillowed armchairs, while clever design details—a bathtub resembling a big galvanized steel wash tub; wall hooks made from a jumble of door knobs and drawer pulls—crank up the fun factor. There are two lovely beaches: one "adults only" (read: topless) and another just below the restaurant and the bi-level pools. The restaurants Wet and Mix on the Beach (both overseen by star chef Alain Ducasse) serve generally above-average and sometimes outstanding food—the mofongo with

prawns will have you licking your fingers. **WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** Go for an oceanfront rather than pool-view room to escape the relentless sound track (787-741-4100; wvies.com; doubles, \$379-\$539). 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

**Turtle Beach Bungalows,**  
St. Kitts

One of the first components of the Christophe Harbour development, Turtle Beach Bungalows provides an experience pared to the essentials: four beachfront one-bedroom bungalows, built of reclaimed pine and concealed by dense landscaping, and a breezy restaurant by the water. That's it. No throbbing lounge bar, no water sports center, no giant spa—a stay here is a true exercise in quietude. The bungalows have bamboo-lined vaulted ceilings and platform beds topped by a platoon of cushions. Sliding doors open to a deck with a plunge pool, a cedar-shingled cabana with a daybed, an outdoor shower under a canopy of sea-grape leaves, and spellbinding views of Nevis and Booby islands. It's a setup perfect for couples who

want little more than each other's company and are content to call on the easygoing staff when they're needed. In the end, it's the details that stand out, from the complimentary in-room snacks (Dean & DeLuca pineapple rings and chocolate malted balls, Ting grapefruit sodas from Jamaica, a bottle of local Brinley rum), to the cell phone programmed with the numbers for the restaurant and concierge (calls to the United States are gratis), to the free airport transfers. **WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** The four bungalows are identical except for variations in their fabrics, but No. 4, Coralita, is the most secluded (869-466-4557; christopheharbour.com; bungalows, \$550). 🍷 🍷 🍷

**CHILE****UNDER \$300** **Palafito 1326,**  
Chiloé Island

56-65-530-053; palafito1326.cl; doubles, \$92-\$115. 🍷 🍷

**UNDER \$300** **Le Rêve Boutique Hotel,**  
Santiago

56-2-757-6000; lerevehotel.cl; doubles, \$230-\$300. 🍷 🍷



**ONE TO WATCH** As of the end of March, the 312-room **Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong** has seized the title of world's tallest hotel, occupying the 102nd to 118th floors of the 1,608-foot-tall International Commerce Centre in Kowloon. Its vertiginous spa (floor 116) and pool (floor 118) should give new meaning to the phrase *floating on air* (ritzcarlton.com).

# Hot Hotels

wooden boats—the Chinese answer to the gondola—complete with a picnic lunch arranged by the hotel.

**WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** No. 206 has a lovely view of the gardens and lake—or ask for one of the lakeside units (86-571-8829-8888; [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com); doubles, \$380-\$610). 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

## Hullett House, Hong Kong

🔥🔥 The Aqua Restaurant Group, which runs a number of Hong Kong's most stylish restaurants (including Aqua), has turned the colonial-era Marine Police headquarters, just steps from the Star Ferry in Kowloon, into a combination of five eateries and ten unique suites. Named for the scenic bays once patrolled by the police stationed here, the suites all have artistic flair (think bathroom chandeliers) and generous terraces overlooking Victoria Harbour. They're also tech-happy (an iPhone dock connected to a surround-sound system and a TV hidden behind a hand-painted panel) and palatial (800 to 1,100 square feet), with thick walls that block out noise from the luxury shopping mall that surrounds this 1881 heritage building. Not surprisingly, the dining options are also notable. Mariners' Rest, a pub, has retrofitted the station's old holding cells into private drinking rooms, and 125-year-old stable doors lead to the casual Stables Grill, the best bet for light Western-style staples. For fancier fare there's the excellent St. George, helmed by a former protégé of French chef Pierre Gagnaire's. **WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** Standout suites are the Stanley, its Chinoiserie theme conjured by birds hand-painted on the robin's egg-blue walls, and the Tsing Lung, with a Confucian temple canopy bed and Chinese landscape murals (852-3988-0000; [hulletthouse.com](http://hulletthouse.com); suites, \$647-\$862). 🍷 🍷 🍷

## St. Regis Lhasa Resort, Lhasa

🔥🔥 With 20-foot lobby ceilings, huge exposed beams, locally woven carpets, and paintings of Tibetan nomads, Lhasa's first luxury hotel combines au courant comforts and Tibetan motifs inspired by the nearby Sera Monastery. The 150 guest rooms and 12 villas, in subdued browns with black-and-white photos of Buddhist pilgrims, have mammoth bathrooms with heated slate floors, heated toilet seats, and a separate tub. Despite the St. Regis's Chinese and Tibetan restaurants, the focal point for meals is Social, where the menu is a bit high-brow for such a little-visited destination—an *amuse-bouche* of rich pumpkin soup with crabmeat, creamy imported Japanese scallops, and a sensational organic lamb rolled in cumin. Not that we're complaining. The grounds showcase clean lines, with a spa pavilion, a meditation gar-



**JEWEL BOX**  
A Deluxe Room at the Grand Hotel Villa Cora in Florence. PAGE 95

## THE HOTTIES



### 6 Best Period Detail

The custom-made Varga Girl-esque playing cards and candy cigarettes in the minibar at the Art Deco **Chatwal**, in New York City. Just call it retro-fitted. PAGE 125

### 7 Best High-Tech Bath

The push-button temperature control and digital display for the bath and shower at Bratislava's **Kempinski Hotel River Park** (yes, 41°C really is a good deal hotter than 39°C). PAGE 112

## Key to Symbols

- 🍷 = Bar/lounge
- 🏖️ = Beach
- 📶 = Free Wi-Fi
- 🏋️ = Gym
- 🏊 = Pool
- ♨️ = Spa
- ♨️🔥 = Hot Spa 2011
- 🕒 = 24-hour room service
- 🔥 = Hot
- 🔥🔥 = Hotter
- 🔥🔥🔥 = Hottest

For the full reviews of hotels designated 🔥 go to [cntraveler.com/hotlist](http://cntraveler.com/hotlist)

den, and 40-foot crimson exterior walls. The enthusiastic and unjaded young Tibetans working here—about half of the staff—not only welcome the chance to share their culture with outsiders but also prize the opportunity for first-class professional training (see “Luxe Comes to Lhasa,” page 24).

**WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** The Lhasa Suite, where the living/dining room and bedroom overlook the magnificent Potala Palace (86-891-680-8888; [stregis.com](http://stregis.com); doubles, \$358-\$593). 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

## Fairmont Peace Hotel, Shanghai

🔥 86-21-6321-6888; [fairmont.com/peacehotel](http://fairmont.com/peacehotel); doubles, \$320-\$350. 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

## Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on the Bund, Shanghai

🔥🔥 Spread across two buildings—20 suites in the beautifully restored 1911 Shanghai Club, 252 rooms and suites in the newly built tower—this hotel is a magnificent homage to Shanghai's swank European past. In addition to opulent colonial-style suites (four-poster beds, walk-in closets, claw-foot tubs), the old building, now called the Waldorf Astoria Club, has a jaw-dropping 110-foot-long bar with Bund views. Rooms are neoclassical—pale-green linen wallpaper, matching silk bedcovers, and carpets with swirling flower motifs—but have all the mod cons, as well as a bathroom where a TV is embedded in the mirror and the Japanese-style toilet has water jets (don't say you weren't warned).

Beyond the bells and whistles, the formal service, and the undeniable comfort, the most memorable part of a stay here is the opportunity to glimpse local high society. During an afternoon tea of delicate red velvet cakes served in the elegant Salon de Ville, watch newly minted Shanghainese millionaires reimagining themselves as the tycoons of yore. **WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** William Waldorf Astor would approve of No. 304, one of 17 expansive river-view suites (86-21-6322-9988; [waldorf-astoriashanghai.com](http://waldorf-astoriashanghai.com); doubles, \$380-\$532). 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

## UNDER \$300 Waterhouse at South Bund, Shanghai

🔥 Singaporean design maestro Loh Lik Peng has skillfully captured the current zeitgeist of Shanghai by revamping a former army compound on the Huangpu River into an industrial but welcoming 19-room guesthouse with rough-hewn concrete walls and mid-century furniture. The architects—Shanghai-based Neri & Hu Design and Research Office—play on the communal lifestyle of Shanghai's traditional shikumen house lanes, blurring the divide between public and private spaces through the use of large windows and glass walls between guest rooms (draw the white curtains to prevent neighboring guests from peeking in). The restaurant, Table No. 1, with metal and knobby-wood communal tables, has an East-West menu: The table spaghetti is a delectable combo of angel-hair Chinese egg noodles with chopped olives and Chinese-style barbecue sauce. The service is choreographed by an energetic waitstaff who are as cool as the Chinese and Western clientele.

**WHICH ROOM TO BOOK:** The Bund Suite, on the top floor, has views of the barges chugging along the Huangpu River (86-21-6080-2988; [waterhouseshanghai.com](http://waterhouseshanghai.com); doubles, \$205-\$266). 🍷 🍷

## ENGLAND

## The Arch, London

🔥 44-20-7724-4700; [thearchlondon.com](http://thearchlondon.com); doubles, \$334-\$513. 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

## Four Seasons Hotel London at Park Lane, London

🔥 How do you reinvigorate a hotel whose problem is not the service it delivers (always impeccable) but the feeling of predictable blandness? The solution for this 41-year-old Mayfair landmark was to undergo a bone-deep refit, apply a sharp jolt of Italian verve, and add some classy English undertones. The result? Cool luxury in the 192 rooms (plentiful marble and mirrors) and a sexy new lobby-side venue—for all-day grazing and imbibing that deflate previous signs of stuffiness. A series of salons in genteel country house tones connects to a bar and a restaurant, Amaranto, designed in an opulent Italian style (cardinal scarlet mixed with dark wood and, again, a lot of mirrors). You

# Hot Spas

dark changing rooms in the ship's bowels bring to mind the phrase *watery coffin*, but the upper water course decks are a sparkling miracle; giant windows and terraces have breathtaking nautical views. **Who goes:** Local dot-commers, chic French-Canadian wedding parties, and Europeans staying in Old Montreal. **The treatment:** The water course is the main event; if you're intent on a facial, try the hydrating Honey Comb, which uses Cassière products. **P.S.:** Make sure the sailor theme doesn't touch your skin—request a non-smoking aesthetician (514-284-0333; massages, \$90-\$131).

## CHINA

### CHI, The Spa at China World Summit Wing, Beijing

**What:** On the seventy-seventh floor of the opulent China World Tower, this intimate six-suite spa—the highest in Beijing—offers treatments based on rebalancing physical and spiritual energy, with Futuresse products made in Baden-Baden, Germany. **The look:** Earth-toned modern treatment suites with flowery wall coverings, couch, private tub, and shower. **Who goes:** Executives prepping for negotiating sessions with Chinese tycoons. **The treatment:** The CHI Balance massage uses acupressure and bone-cracking massage to stimulate yang energies, and gentle pressure to encourage yin impulses. **P.S.:** Swing by Atmosphere, the hotel's hip eightieth-floor bar, after your session (86-10-6505-2299; massages, \$88-\$210).

### Spa at Four Seasons Hotel Hangzhou at West Lake, Hangzhou

**What:** A destination spa at this Four Seasons property (see "Hot Hotels") based on the concept of an emperor's bathhouse. **The look:** A modern take on a Chinese palace, with multiroom treatment areas (which guests reach by crossing an indoor brook), private dressing rooms, huge bathtubs, and atmospheric light-



#### ▲ THE INGREDIENT

Juniper berries give your gin martini a woody note, and provide anti-septic and anti-inflammatory effects in the treatment room.

#### ▲ THE TREATMENTS

• Warm river stones are infused with balsam fir, pine, and juniper oils for an après-ski massage at the Spa at Four Seasons Resort Vail.

• Note juniper's piney presence in The Spa at the Waikiki Edition's Soothing Detoxifying Mineral Treatment, which restores sun-distraught skin.

**TAKE IT HOME** Caudalie's Crushed Cabernet Scrub features juniper and cypress essential oils (caudalie-usa.com; \$29).

#### ▼ GIVE ME MOOR

Montreal's Bota Bota spa occupies a former pleasure boat.

ing. **Who goes:** Well-heeled Shanghai-nese and expats craving a break from Asia's capitals. **The treatment:** The head-to-toe Imperial Consorts' and Concubines' Perfumed-Water Rituals involves a bath and a massage, leaving you fragrant and super-relaxed. **P.S.:** Don't miss the indoor pool, with its pearl and gold leaf ceiling (86-571-8829-8888; massages, \$76-\$205).

### The Spa at Mandarin Oriental, Macau

**What:** Nirvana for Macau-going mortals, with eight treatment areas including four couples suites, the most lavish of which is the Oriental Spa Suite, with its own steam room, sunken tub, and experience shower. **The look:** Imperial decadence in lush silk and marble. **Who goes:** High rollers and Hong Kong *tai tais* (ladies who lunch). **The treatment:** After a footbath overlooking Macau's increasingly impressive neon skyline, spring for the signature full-body Spices of Portugal—a nod to Macau's colonial days—includes ginger-, rosemary-, and black pepper-infused oils by Aromatherapy Associates. **P.S.:** Arrive early to take advantage of the amethyst crystal steam room, sauna, and muscle-relaxing vitality pool (853-8805-8588; massages, \$118-\$179).

### The Ritz-Carlton Spa by ESPA, Shanghai

**What:** A glittering spa on two high floors of the chic Ritz-Carlton Shanghai in Pudong, with a steam room, a rock sauna, and an ice fountain. Treatments range from traditional Chinese dry massage to European salt and oil scrubs. **The look:** Art Deco-inspired relaxation, treatment, and communal changing rooms, all in white with sparkles of copper gold, as a riff on the traditional Chinese cracked ice motif. **Who goes:** Well-heeled expat mothers and fat-cat Chinese tycoons from the booming, factory-sprinkled regions near Shang-

hai. **The treatment:** The outrageously relaxing full-body Yin and Yang Rebalancer includes a facial cleanse and a limb-by-limb deep-pressure rubdown. **P.S.:** Make time for ginger tea and *biscotti* in the relaxation room, with spectacular Bund views (86-21-2020-1888; massages, \$59-\$160).

## CURAÇAO

### Atabei, Nieuwpoort

**What:** A skinny mini-oasis near the pool area at the one-year-old Hyatt Regency Curacao Golf Resort, Spa and Marina. **The look:** Classic Zen, with high ceilings, muted colors, distressed wood floors, a wall covered by shimmering, gauzy curtains, and the scent of aromatherapy oils. **Who goes:** Honeymooning couples, Dutch and American resort guests, and Curaçao society dames. **The treatment:** During the 60- or 90-minute Stemps, the relief comes from traditional sweeping massage strokes using organic infused oil alternating with herb-filled, heated poultices. **P.S.:** Post-treatment, don't unwind in the outdoor relaxation area—the music from nearby Medi restaurant and the chatter from other guests will shatter your newfound serenity (599-9-840-1234; massages, \$70-\$180).

## ENGLAND

### The Spa at Coworth Park, Surrey

**What:** A two-story hillside eco-spa in a country house hotel (see "Hot Hotels"), with a living roof of fragrant herbs, a Spatisserie for virtuous dining and champagne, a gym, a steam room, an experience shower, and a large, dramatically illuminated pool. **The look:** Dazzling white walls and skylights bring in natural light; pinky-beige lampshades lend the changing room a mellow glow. Elsewhere, furnishings are modern minimalist, with eccentric flourishes. **Who goes:** Burned-out city couples on romantic escapes; yummy mummies with nannies and (sometimes noisy) children in tow. **The treatment:** The English Rose Wrap comprises an exfoliation with crushed olive pits, a hydrating rose gel, an oil and cream wrap, and a nurturing neck and scalp massage. **P.S.:** Ask for Sarah: The only problem with her massage is that it ends (44-13-4487-6600; massages, \$89-\$195).

### Herb House Spa, Hampshire

**What:** Three-story jewel in the crown of Lime Wood, a glam David Collins-designed country-house hotel, with an indoor pool opening onto an outdoor hot tub, an outside sauna overlooking the forest, yoga and meditation in a rooftop herb garden, and treatments by British brands. **The look:** Sophisticated organic: clean-lined oak doors and gray stone floors set off with antique botanical prints, pots of herbs, wicker lanterns, and off-white weatherboard storage. **Who goes:** Hampshire and Berkshire ladies who lunch, and weekend Londoners. **The treatment:** The Seaweed Leaf Wrap, created by Irish brand Voya, is slimy but sensual, and leaves skin as smooth and soft as silk. **P.S.:** Stock up on Bamford Botanic Rose Bath Oil before you leave (44-23-8028-6998; massages, \$122-\$204).

