

# Tales from the Road

FOUND BOOKS FORGE BONDS,  
HOWEVER FANCIFUL, WITH OTHER  
TRAVELLERS – HOTEL GUESTS FROM  
LAST WEEK OR LAST DECADE

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**THE MAN SITTING NEXT TO ME** on the flight to **Madrid** from **Tenerife** was reading an e-book. I asked him how he liked it and he said fine, that it had been a recent gift. He smiled at the book in my hands. E-books are suddenly everywhere; real books just weigh you down. Everyone says so.

But consider this: You're in a hotel, where there is a library. There you find books published in every imaginable language – very often your own. You choose a book and leave one behind. Found books forge bonds, however fanciful, with other travellers – hotel guests from last week or last decade.

Indeed, some hotel libraries are their own attractions, like the library I'd just left at the **Grand Luxe Hotel Botanico** in **Santa Cruz de Tenerife**. International newspapers beckoned from a polished mahogany table; light filtered through the shuttered windows, bathing chairs and shelves in a tropical glow. It was easy to imagine frequent Tenerife visitor Agatha Christie penning a country-house murder mystery in a room like this one.

In fact, some Christie characters, like the mysterious Mr. Quin and the dogged Mr. Satterthwaite, came to life in Santa Cruz. Naturally, her books line these library shelves – she has a festival and a street named after her too – along with cerebral tales by Italian author Umberto Eco and obscure German texts – their obscurity being my own assumption. They are written in German, after all.

For book lovers, hotels and their libraries are seductive places. An overflowing bookshelf reminds us of home, when home is halfway around the world. On a recent Eastern trip, we discovered a mini-library of books stacked next to the registration desk at the small and perfect **Hotel de Pavillon** in **Siem Reap, Cambodia**. Shelves offered both the practical – *Rough Guides* and *Lonely Planets* for charting our days touring Manhattan-sized **Angkor Wat** – and the surprising.

In Siem Reap I discovered Charlotte Mendelson, the British author of *Daughters of Jerusalem*, a “compelling read” according to the jacket copy. Plunging into this portrait of







family dysfunction among Oxford academics, I whiled away our five-hour layover at **Bangkok's** busiest airport. In its place, I left future Hotel de Pavillon guests *The Fabled East* by Canadian writer Adam Lewis Schroeder, a tale of magic and intrigue in French Indochina.

Next stop was **George Town**, the capital of **Penang, Malaysia**. Friends picked us up at the airport and deposited us at the **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion**, a romantic blue-hued boutique hotel. Its remarkable carvings, decorative porcelain and perfect *feng shui* were designed at the behest of tin millionaire Cheong Fatt Tze, famously dubbed 'the Rockefeller of the East,' and a band of passionate Penang architects and designers has restored its formerly downtrodden beauty to glowing perfection.

We arrived late on a warm night, stepping neatly into the colonial past the instant the elderly watchman (*jaga*) removed the length of wood guarding the entrance. Tired, my husband planted himself in front of the only television on the property – the Super Bowl was just starting – and was immediately joined by the young night manager, curious about this American game. Looking up, the same quick-witted manager commented on the book I was carrying: Malaysian novelist Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World*. "That's not available here yet." I left it for him on our departure.

In the former British colonies of the East, booksellers often make straight exchanges for used books of equal value. On my last day in

Penang, *Daughters of Jerusalem* in tow, I slogged through the sultry afternoon heat to **Chulia Street** and **H.S. Sam Book Store**, the self-proclaimed "most organised used book shop in town."

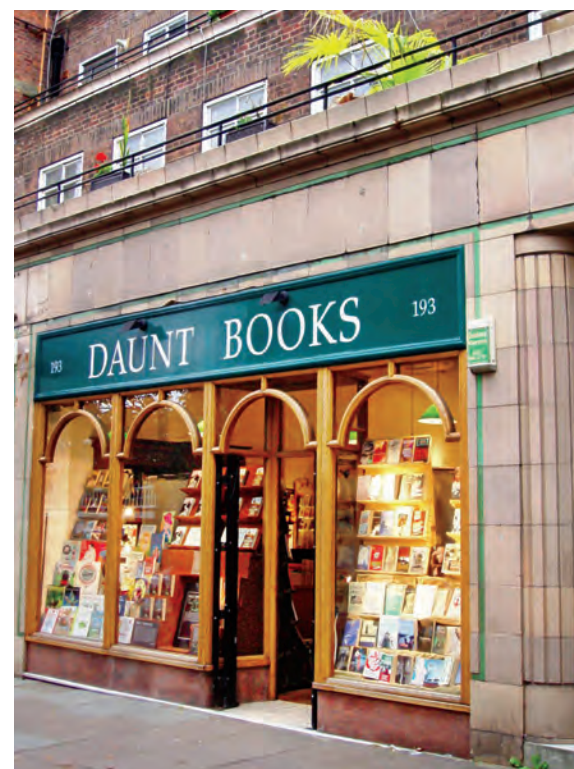
Like Prospero's cave, H.S. Sam contains a world of treasures. Not only are there books "in ten languages, buy/sell/exchange," but the store also offers "new batik, silk clothing, souvenirs, A/C VIP bus, speed boat, train tickets and all tours, Thai-Visa, email, overseas phone calls, rent a car, motor-bike, mountain bike, bicycle." One-stop shopping, you might say.

Still, I'd perused Sam's bookshelves without excitement, reduced to thumbing through a stack of batik hankies, inanely remarking to the sarong-clad man behind the counter, "It's not that I *hate* the butterflies." At this, someone shouted from the recesses of the shop. "Yes you do, you *hate* the butterflies!" I recognized that accent. Soon I was trading travel tales with two travellers from my hometown of Toronto.

"*This* is the book you want," they told me. Having just purchased the second volume in Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series, they were certain that the first instalment, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, was the book for me. Obediently, I reached for the Larsson as the man behind the counter interjected, "No discount, that one, bestseller." No problem.

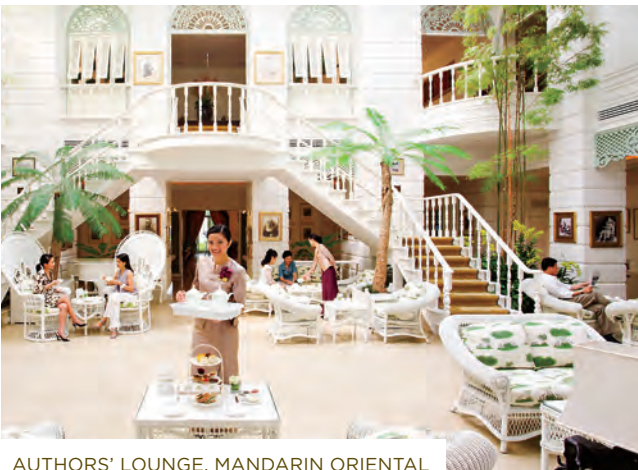
Five hundred and thirty-eight pages in the company of investigative journalist Mikael Blomkvist and his tattooed hacker sidekick Lisbeth Salander sweetened the 20-hour flight home. Larsson remains on my shelf in Toronto, a fond souvenir of a chance meeting on a tropical afternoon on Chulia Street, which I'm certain Larsson would have loved as much as I do. Stockholm or no Stockholm, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is forever linked with H.S. Sam Book Store; its first leaf stamped with helpful information, should I ever need a Thai visa, a VIP bus, or a speedboat.

Years of travel have yielded many surprises, not the least a free-flowing supply of books, gifts from friends I'll meet once or never at all. At **Barbados'** former Almond Beach Club (it's now under new ownership and called **The Club, Barbados Resort and Spa**), I discovered British novelist Sebastian Faulks – not the man himself, but the next best thing: One of his delicious, mystery-laden romances. *On Green Dolphin Street* unfolds against a backdrop of Miles Davis, Greenwich Village, Cold War intrigue and the dawn of the Kennedy era. I left it behind on the library shelves of a charming seaside spot called **Peach and Quiet**. Heading for the airport, I imagined the next guest choosing 'my' book, grateful perhaps at this gift from a fellow road reader.





HOTEL BOTANICO



AUTHORS' LOUNGE, MANDARIN ORIENTAL



THE CHESTERFIELD LIBRARY

*A random and very personal selection of hotel libraries and bookstores that have offered solace to this word-addicted traveller.*

### CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN

The library of the jewel-like **Hotel Botanico** in Tenerife ([hotelbotanico.com](http://hotelbotanico.com)) is a place to hang out, read and absorb the atmosphere of this Grand Luxe establishment. A guide to the remarkable art displayed on the hotel walls is available at the front desk.

### ST. JAMES, BARBADOS

Like many Caribbean resorts, **The Club, Barbados Resort and Spa**, an adults-only establishment ([theclubbarbados.com](http://theclubbarbados.com)), boasts a clubby atmosphere evocative of long-ago Britain, with a library that never disappoints.

### BANGKOK, THAILAND

The original **Oriental Hotel** ([mandarinoriental.com/bangkok](http://mandarinoriental.com/bangkok)) on the **Chao Phraya River** in **Bangkok** is famous for its **Authors' Lounge** and library; shelves are bursting with books by former guests like Gore Vidal and Joseph Conrad and it's still the perfect place to enjoy high tea. At **River Books** ([riverbooksbk.com](http://riverbooksbk.com)) near **Wat Po Temple** (home of Thai massage), we could not tear ourselves away from an astonishing collection – everything from ancient Thai history to photographic collections of the bright decorations favoured by the city's *tuk-tuk* drivers.

### PUERTO ESCONDIDO, MEXICO

**Villas Carrizalillo** ([villascarrizalillo.com](http://villascarrizalillo.com)) is the place to gather at sunset for vacationing snowbirds, plus its outdoor lounge entices with books donated by visitors with excellent taste in British, American and Canadian authors.

### LONDON, ENGLAND

**The Chesterfield** naturally has a library, and also a storied neighbour in independent bookseller **Heywood Hill** (10 Curzon Street), where writer Nancy Mitford worked during the war: A hidden gem of a bookshop where the staff perform their duties as helpful guides to both new and rare books. **Daunt Books** ([dauntbooks.co.uk](http://dauntbooks.co.uk)) is another favourite London independent, because the Edwardian shop at 83 Marylebone High Street is lovely, because the staff are knowledgeable and because travel books are a specialty.

### MONT TREBLANT, QUEBEC

**La Quintessence** ([hotelquintessence.com](http://hotelquintessence.com)) feels like a luxurious European boutique hotel and, sure enough, tucked away on the second floor there's a charming library with books on the Laurentian region as well as a surprising rarity: A children's book written in Gaelic.

### VIRGINIA BEACH, USA

At the **Cavalier Hotel** ([cavalierhotel.com](http://cavalierhotel.com)) in family-friendly **Virginia Beach**, in a small library in the original 1927 building, where Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald may have stayed in the 1920s and where Dwight Eisenhower certainly did decades later, I was delighted to find that British visitors had left behind a British first edition of Zadie Smith's debut bestseller, *White Teeth*. 'Impressed' doesn't cover it.