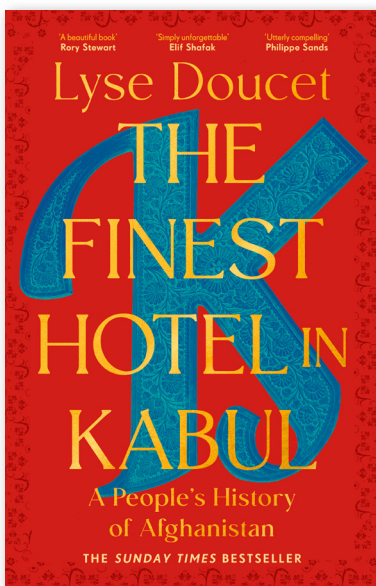


The Finest Hotel in Kabul

A People's History of Afghanistan

by Lyse Doucet



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1969, the luxury Hotel Inter-Continental Kabul opened its doors: a glistening white box, high on a hill, that reflected Afghanistan's hopes of becoming a modern country, connected to the world.

Lyse Doucet first checked into the Inter-Continental on Christmas Eve 1988. In the decades since, she has witnessed a Soviet evacuation, a devastating civil war, the US invasion, and the rise, fall and rise of the Taliban, all from within its increasingly battered walls. The Inter-Con has never closed its doors.

Now, she weaves together the experiences of the Afghans who have kept the hotel running to craft a richly immersive history of their country. It is the story of Hazrat, the septuagenarian housekeeper who still holds fast to his Inter-Continental training from the hotel's 1970s glory days – an era of haute cuisine and high fashion, when Afghanistan was a kingdom and Kabul was the 'Paris of Central Asia'. Of Abida, who became the first female chef after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. And of Malalai and Sadeq, the twenty-somethings who seized every opportunity offered by two decades of fragile democracy – only to see the Taliban come roaring back in 2021.

Through these intimate portraits of Afghan life, the story of a hotel becomes the story of a people.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *The Finest Hotel in Kabul*, the reader cannot help but wonder about the author and her often perilous life as the BBC's Chief International Correspondent. Ever the journalist, Doucet's concerns are for the people that she writes about and not herself: she brings a wonderful array of characters to life, all of whom are connected with the Inter-Continental Hotel, and follows them through the decades as they endure regime changes, war, oppression and bouts of freedom and joy.



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“Incredibly human and readable... a work of art in many unexpected ways”

NICOLA ELLIOTT
2026 JUDGE



For the main part, Doucet does not discuss her own feelings or experiences in Afghanistan, but there are some subtle peeks into her daily life through the eyes of fellow journalists:

‘Hour after hour, day after day, journalists pitched up at the front desk, pleading for a room: correspondents, camera operators, producers, satellite engineers. Every room – even ones with toilets blocked, ceiling beams exposed, windows plastered with plastic – was gratefully taken. When more BBC teams piled in, including one with Lyse Doucet, five women squeezed into a single room.’

Doucet doesn’t comment about how this made her feel – whether she was scared, uncomfortable, excited – but what does come through is her concern and affection for those around her.

In sacrificing her own narrative for the sake of her subjects, Doucet puts their stories first rather than her own, and writes with both a marvellous compassion and strict journalistic impartiality.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Doucet presents the Inter-Continental Hotel as a kind of symbol of Afghanistan itself: a resilient entity that survives fire, bombing and war, that acts as a sanctuary – and never closes.

Doucet describes how, in 1992, the mujahideen fighters got stuck in its revolving door and were confused by its lift, as if the hotel were resisting the claims of its new residents. Doucet observes that:

‘Lives long governed by God’s will, and the vagaries of the weather and war, were clashing with the structures and systems of this modern hotel.’

When the Taliban returned in 2021, one of them commented, ‘We wouldn’t have been able to enter the hotel in these clothes before’, suggesting that the hotel had a sense of exclusivity in the past which ensured that it only admitted its guests of choice.

How does the hotel act as a symbol, and what is it a symbol of? Is it symbolic of relationships between Afghanistan and the UK and Europe? How is that represented in the book, and how does that relationship change over time? Does the Inter-Con have a character of its own? How could it be described?

QUESTIONS

What were the saddest moments in the book for you? What were the most heartwarming?

Is it easy to imagine the Balmain fashion show that happened in 1971 at the hotel? Is this something you would have thought would have happened in Afghanistan?



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If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

In her preface, Doucet says, 'History always moves in a multitude of singular stories that carry far bigger truths.' How does this apply to *The Finest Hotel in Kabul*?

How difficult is it to imagine the sudden extreme changes in life for women in Afghanistan between 1970 and the present day? How do you feel about what life is like for women under the Taliban?

NEXT STEPS

Choose one of the photos included in *The Finest Hotel in Kabul* and use it as a creative writing prompt. Imagine that you are able to walk into the picture. What do you see outside of the confines of the photo? What are the smells, tastes and sounds? What do the textures feel like? If there is a person in the photo, who are they and what are they saying? What might have happened just before the picture was taken, and what might happen just after?

Alternatively, you might like to write a letter as Lyse Doucet to a friend about her daily life at the Inter-Con or about a specific event that happens while she's there. Imagine how she might feel, what she can see from her hotel window, what she eats, who she talks to that day. What might the personal Lyse sound like in a letter? Would she confess fears, hopes, predict what she thinks will happen next? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lyse Doucet first arrived at the Kabul Inter-Continental Hotel on Christmas Day 1988, the day after her 30th birthday. A junior BBC reporter, she was there to cover the withdrawal of Soviet troops following their decade-long occupation of Afghanistan. Today, Lyse is the BBC's Chief International Correspondent and has led BBC coverage of events ranging from the Arab Spring to the Sudanese Civil War. She still visits the Inter-Continental Hotel whenever she is in Afghanistan. She counts many of its staff and fellow guests as her close friends.



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If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *The Storyteller's Daughter: Return to a Lost Homeland*, British writer Saira Shah chronicles a journey of discovery when she visits Afghanistan for the first time to reclaim her heritage. *My Pen Is the Wing of a Bird* is a landmark collection: the first anthology of short fiction by Afghan women. Eighteen writers tell stories that are both unique and universal – stories of family, work, childhood, friendship, war, gender identity and cultural traditions.

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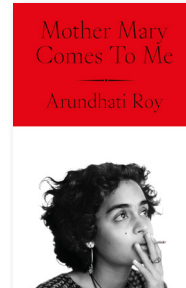
The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan
by Lyse Doucet



Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War
by Jane Rogoyska



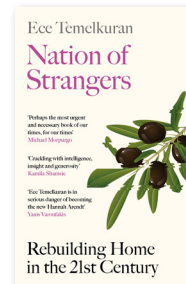
Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transform Our Health
by Daisy Fancourt



Mother Mary Comes to Me
by Arundhati Roy



Artists, Siblings, Visionaries: The Lives and Loves of Gwen and Augustus John
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Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century
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