

Exploration

Spain's LeDomaine

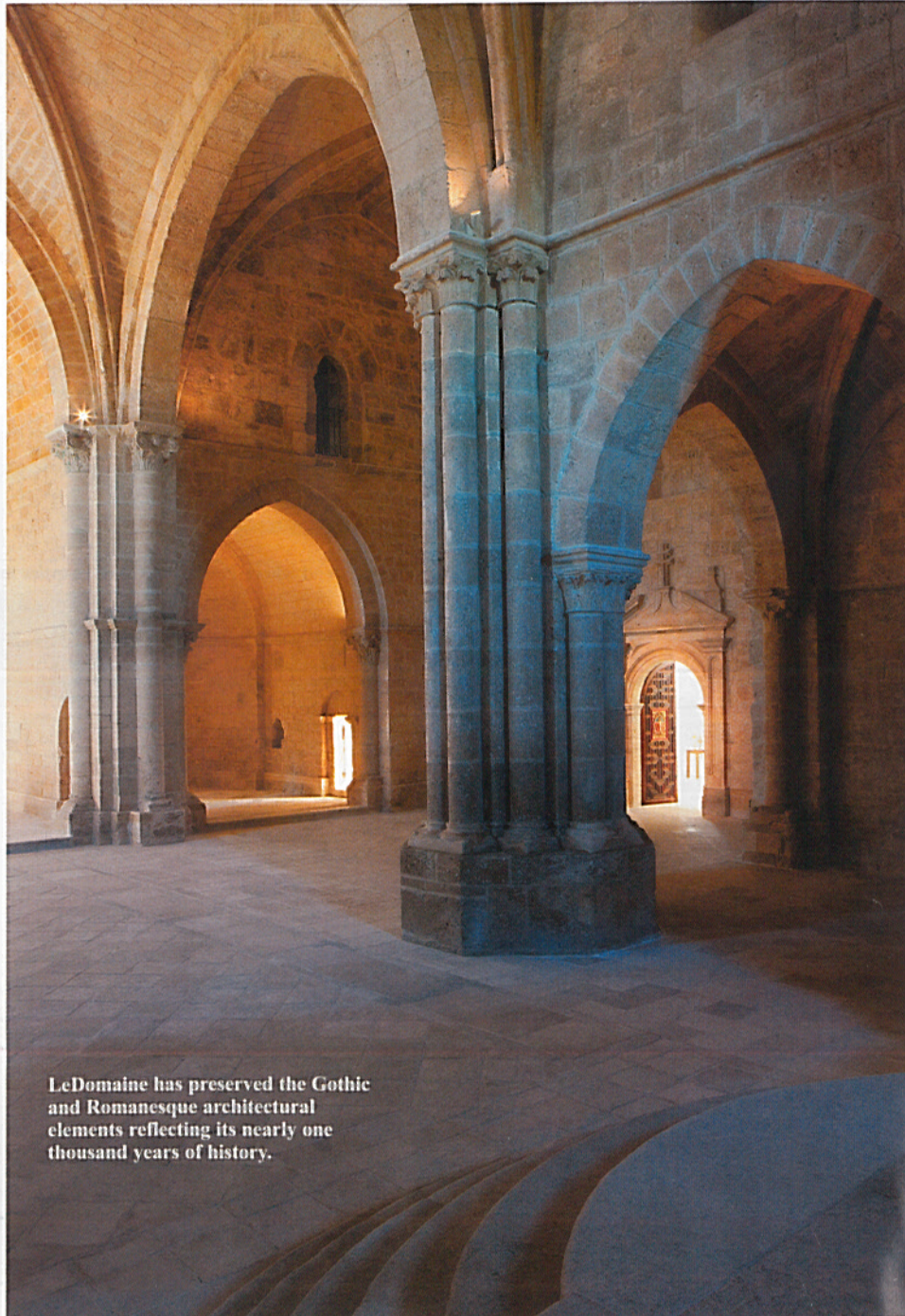
A 12th-Century Monastery with 21st-Century Luxury

Richard Warren

Don't expect to lead the life of a monk at Abadía Retuerta LeDomaine, although you may well say a prayer of thanks for its luxury. Founded as the Santa Maria de Retuerta monastery in the 12th century, nowadays it is simply called LeDomaine. It is a five-star hotel in Spain's Ribera del Duero wine region about two hours north of Madrid. It sits like a jewel in the beautiful Duero river valley surrounded by a landscape filled with vineyards.

In operation for just five years, LeDomaine opened after a renovation so meticulously preserving the monastery's historical features that it won a Europa Nostra Award from the European Union for conserving cultural heritage. Though its 27 spacious guest rooms are furnished in a contemporary fashion (many rooms have original Joan Miró lithographs, for example), the public areas still have a monastic feel. There's a classic Gothic cloisters; a Romanesque church now used for public events and the original dining hall, now a Michelin-starred restaurant, with vaulted ceilings and a 17th-century fresco of The Last Supper. The overriding atmosphere throughout the facility is almost Zen-like, with a sense of peace and quiet far removed from the noise and bustle of everyday life.

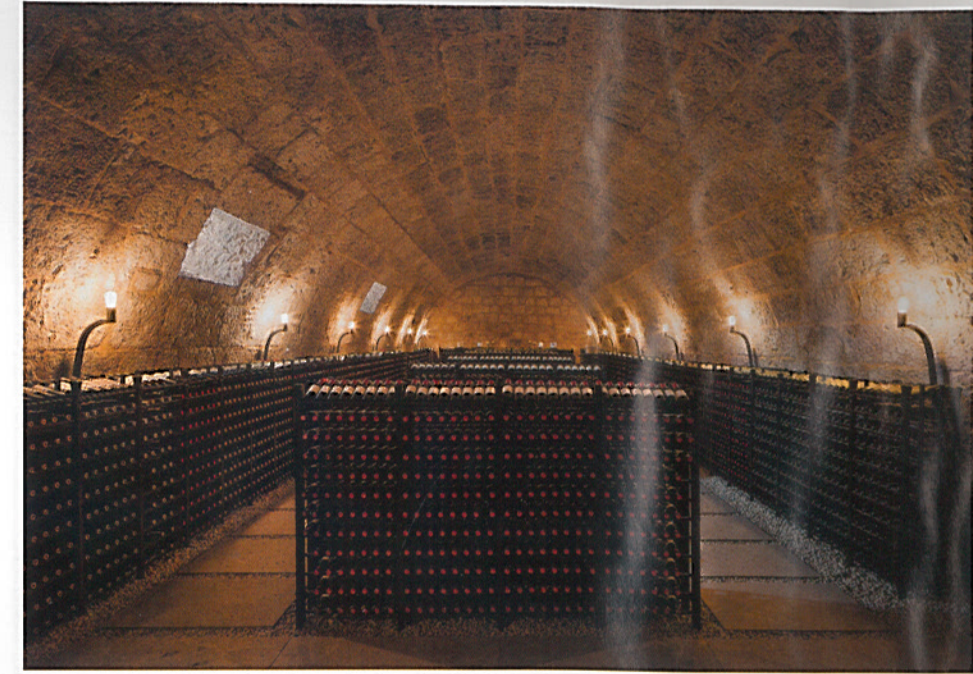
In its short time of operation, LeDomaine has garnered no shortage of kudos. In 2016, it was named the Best Hotel in Spain by both *TripAdvisor* and the Spanish magazine *Club de Gourmets*. It's



LeDomaine has preserved the Gothic and Romanesque architectural elements reflecting its nearly one thousand years of history.



LeDomaine's Michelin-starred restaurant is in what used to be the monks' refectory, complete with a fresco of The Last Supper. Wine served in the restaurant is stored in a centuries-old underground vault.



Set in the beautiful Duero river valley, LeDomaine is surrounded by hundreds of acres of vineyards.





Abadía Retuerta produces wine made from grapes grown in 54 separate plots on its 1,700-acre estate.

Reflecting pools outside LeDomaine's Sanctuary Wellness & Spa Center offer tranquility to guests getting treatments in adjacent rooms.



also been selected as one of "The Top 50 Greatest Hotels in the World" in the British *Daily Telegraph's* upscale travel supplement. Earlier in 2017, LeDomaine received

the top honor in *Andrew Harper's Hideaway* report and in March it joined the exclusive portfolio of members of *Virtuoso*.

The unparalleled level of service

each guest receives at LeDomaine is no small part of its success. There are three staff members for every guest, and immediately upon arrival, every visitor is assigned a personal butler and given a cell phone to summon him or her at any hour. (My own was quick to respond when I stained a pair of pants with ink.) While leaving the kitchen after a cooking demonstration, we were startled to see our photos taped to the wall with notations of our likes and dislikes. So *that* was why all the waiters knew about my fondness for Eggs Benedict! The staff members also took note of my obsession with watching the storks roosting in a huge nest in the belfry of the former church — after a couple of nights, they stopped closing the shutters in my room, so I could hop up and peer out at the birds even after dark.

Since the Ribera del Duero is one of Spain's primary wine-making regions, LeDomaine takes full advantage of its location by growing grapes in 54 separate plots on its more than 1,700-acre estate. The "denomination of origin" (D.O.) appellation assigned to the region by Spain means very strict regulations are applied to the wine production in Ribera del Duero. A wine can only be given a Ribera del Duero D.O. label, for example, if 75 percent of the grapes used in its production are Tempranillo, which produce a very full-bodied, flavorful red wine.

Abadía Retuerta, the winery associated with LeDomaine however, has the distinct advantage of being located just outside the D.O.'s boundaries, giving it the same access to the incomparable soil and climate conditions found in the Duero river valley that other winemakers enjoy but also allowing the freedom to experiment with other types of grape varieties and wines. In addition to wines using Tempranillo grapes, Abadía Retuerta also grows Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot and some white varieties that until 2011 were only grown experimentally. That experimentation has substantially paid off, however. The resort's



Falconry exhibitions and horseback riding are just two of the experiences available to guests at LeDomaine.



outstanding white blend using sauvignon blanc, a touch of Verdejo and other white varieties quickly became my drink of choice during my stay.

Wines produced in the estate's world-class winery also work their way onto the menu in places other than at dinner. At its 10,000-square-foot Santuario Wellness & Spa Center, for example, treatments actually begin with a wine tasting, a form of "fusion wine" vinotherapy found nowhere else. Based on your wine preference during the tasting, your "spa sommelier" then decides the essential oils that will be used in your procedures, pairing the properties of the wine with the properties of the oils. Based on the wine they've chosen, spa guests may find themselves being rubbed down in treatments that alternately give energy boosts, relaxation from stress or increased mental clarity.

During my own Grand Cru spa treatment, for example, the wine I chose led to an oil with a heavy fragrance of rosemary, one of my favorite aromas,

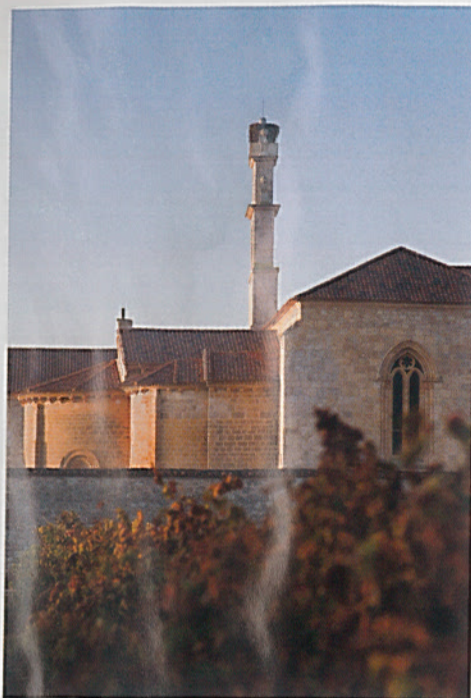
which I find somehow energizing and relaxing at the same time. Before the massage that ended the hour-long procedure, I was also treated to a foot bath, exfoliating body scrub, and an age-defying body wrap. I later had a facial treatment using the same oils. Other spa amenities include both indoor and outdoor pools using water purified so thoroughly on site it easily could be bottled and drunk.

Pampering continues with the gastronomic experiences to be had in the Michelin-starred main restaurant, where chef Marc Segarra uses locally sourced ingredients, and at Vinoteca, a casual restaurant also on the premises that serves a tapas-style menu. In warmer months, guests can dine al fresco at Jardin del Claustro.

Local specialties such as Iberian ham, milk-fed baby lamb, and "cecina," a salted and dried beef, frequently made their way onto the menus, as well as local produce making an appearance in dishes such as smoked cauliflower soup, chard millefeuilles, and assorted vegetables sautéed in fennel cream. Memorable

entrées included tiger mussels, glazed lamb shin, pork cheek stew, and 40 day dry-aged ribeye. Of course it wouldn't be Spain without a wide range of tapas, with cuttlefish stuffed with pork trotters being particularly flavorful. Desserts were almost decadently delicious ranging from spiced and aromatized brioche and rosemary cream with honey, pine nuts and toffee. And remember, the waiters are taking note of what you like or dislike.

As previously mentioned, cooking demonstrations can be enjoyed by visitors, but that's just one of a wide array of other available experiences such as horseback or bicycle riding and even falconry exhibits, helicopter rides or flamenco demonstrations inside the former church. In the health center, yoga and Pilates classes can be enjoyed in a space where a 16th-century Buddha serenely gazes on participants. Winery experiences include so much more than a visit to where the wine is made. In the fall, visitors can actually participate in the harvesting experience if they choose or at other times



A huge stork's nest sits atop the belfry of the monks' former church.

of year enjoy, as we did, a spirited ride in a Land Rover through the vineyards to the tops of nearby hills.

Since LeDomaine is situated in a wine-making region in the famous ancient province of Castile-Leon, those who want to tour the countryside can visit the nearby historic city of Valladolid, the capital of Spain long before Madrid, where Ferdinand and Isabella were married and where Columbus died. Alternately, they can traverse the so-called Golden Mile, (actually more like six miles) where a number of wineries are lined up in a row, including one where wine tasting is tied to cosmetic applications. The nearby town of Peñafiel has a town square where bull-fights occasionally take place and a hilltop castle in the shape of a ship.

But then again, it's so relaxing inside the walls of LeDomaine, with so many experiences to enjoy, no one can be blamed for just staying put and enjoying the

luxurious surroundings.

Ohio-based travel writer Richard Warren travels the country and the world looking for offbeat and off-the-beaten-path stories. This year, in addition to exploring wine tourism routes in Spain, he has searched for leprechauns in Ireland and went on a ghost hunt in the house where the Lizzie Borden murders took place. His work has been published in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *AAA Home and Away*, *AAA Highroads*, *Ohio Magazine*, *Country Living*, *Long Weekends* and others.

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BOOK REVIEW

Zen Mind, Zen Horse
by Allan J. Hamilton, M.D., Storey Publishing, 2011

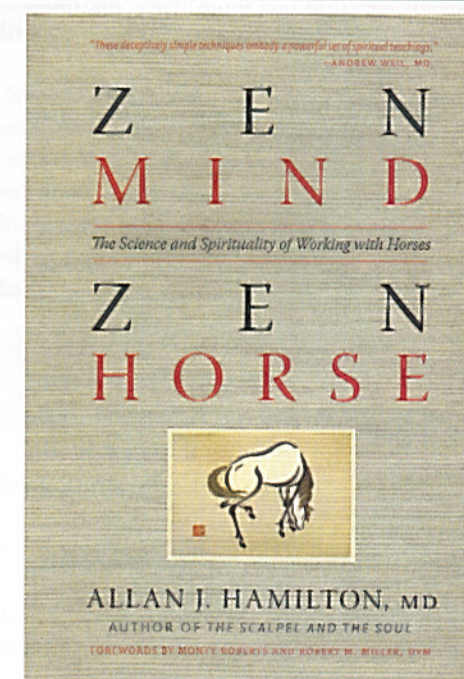
Barclay Rives

An early chapter of *Zen Mind, Zen Horse* describes how a legendary Japanese horse master said he was just beginning to understand horsemanship shortly before his death at the age of 100. He felt his long life spent with horses had merely given him a good start as an equestrian. I have been around horses most of my life. I understand his humility.

Zen Mind, Zen Horse explores the interaction between humans and horses. Hamilton declares his book is not about riding but about "gaining insight into yourself through training." Most of the text and illustrations concern so-called ground work, when trainer and horse are eye to eye. The book aims to help the reader better understand and engage in equine communication.

Hamilton explains how horses use "chi" as their primary language. He defines the Chinese term chi as "the all encompassing universal life force." Chi is focused energy, aura or "vibe." Horses express chi through posture, gesture and motion. A mare can direct her foal in any direction with strategic pressure. Horses are prey animals. Silent communication within the herd enables them to listen for approaching predators and alert each other to danger. Spookiness, the inclination to sprint away from perceived threats, increases survival odds in the wild.

Horses sense their handlers' energy, or chi, and test it constantly. They can take advantage of weakness. I used to do a little horseshoeing and trimming around my neighborhood. Horses or ponies that



dominated their fearful owners were dangerous customers that I tried to avoid. Hamilton claims that every horse gesture is meaningful, every head toss and ear swivel. He agrees with famous trainer Monty Roberts and others who believe that a horse licking his or her lips during a training session signals willingness to learn and obey. Animal behaviorists theorize that the licking is a declaration that the individual is an herbivore, therefore not a threat.

Hamilton lists four essential qualities a successful horseman must possess: command, control, compassion and communication. Horses in the wild look for these same qualities in the leader of the herd. The herd leader or horseman must project authority or command. The effective leader is in control as well as

under control, never losing one's temper. Compassion allows a trainer to visualize the situation as the horse sees it, which helps produce sensible, achievable training lessons. Communication must be clear. The horse must understand what is expected.

Hamilton is a neurosurgeon as well as a horse trainer. He explains differences between equine and human brains. One major difference is that humans have many more connections between the right and left hemispheres of their brains than horses do. Connecting white-matter bundles, known as *corpus callosum*, are much more highly developed in the human brain. This enables a person who has learned to perform a task with one hand to be able to attempt the same task with the other hand without further explanation. A horse who has learned a task involving one side must start from the beginning to learn the task on the other side. My first horse would only approach a gate with his left side until he was middle-aged. Teaching him to approach a gate with his right side required time and patience.

Each chapter of the book concludes with a one-page summary of its most important ideas. The book contains an extensive bibliography, including well-known classics by famous authorities. One of my favorite titles is *My Horses, My Teachers* by Alois Podhajsky, the former head of Vienna's Spanish Riding School. Horses teach the trainer. Hamilton inherited his love of horses from his grandfather, an Austrian cavalry officer whose favorite horse was killed in World War I.