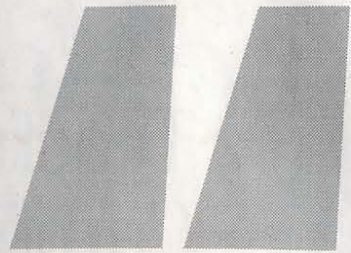


# The Daily Telegraph

NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

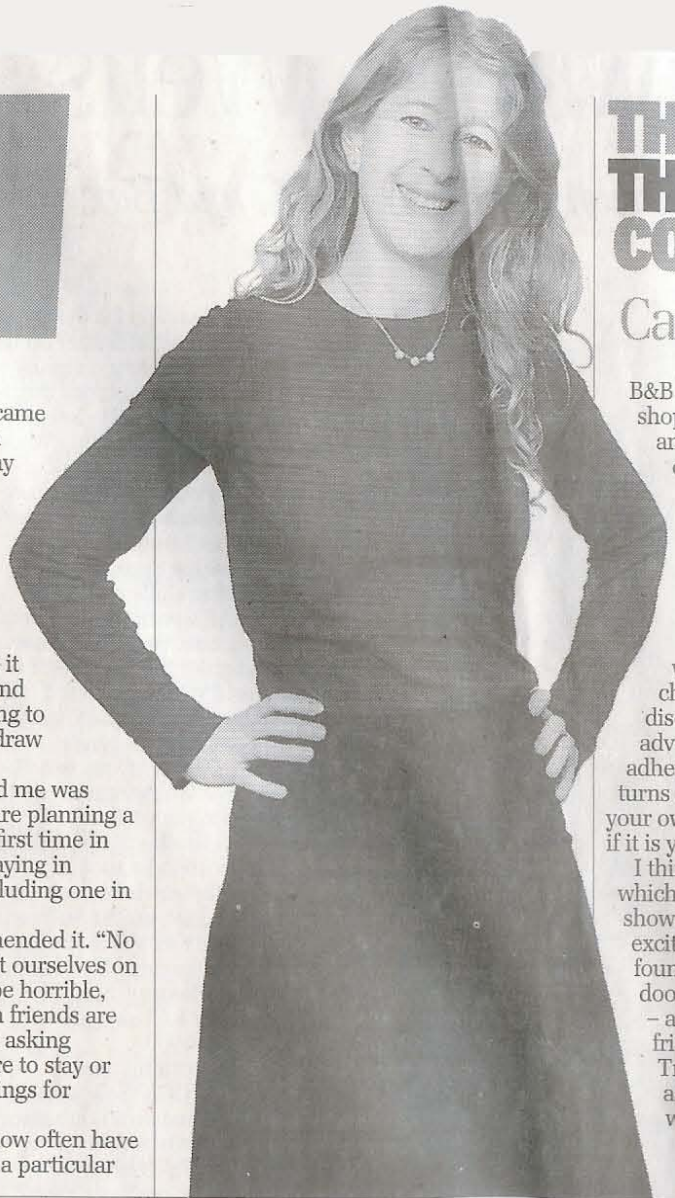


A few days ago, I came back from an illicit night in Brussels, though illicit in my book is nothing to do with deceit and off-limits lovers. I was staying with my oldest friend in the world, who has gone to live there for a year with her husband and children. The visit was illicit because it was an escape from work and domesticity, and had nothing to do with culture. We didn't draw breath for 24 hours.

One of the things she told me was that she and her husband are planning a four-day trip alone for the first time in eight years. They will be staying in various hotels in Spain, including one in Barcelona.

I asked who had recommended it. "No one," she said. "We found it ourselves on the internet. It'll probably be horrible, but recommendations from friends are often just as bad. We're not asking anyone what to see or where to stay or eat. We want to discover things for ourselves."

She is absolutely right. How often have friends insisted that I go to a particular



## THE THURSDAY COLUMN

Candida Crewe

B&B or restaurant or play or film or shop, whether at home or abroad – and I have dutifully gone along, full of merry anticipation, only to be crushingly disappointed. The hot tip is passed on in the spirit of generosity, flecked with just a teeny little bit of smugness. People tell you that there is a perfect little place in Devon or Seville or Mull or Timbuktu, which they "found quite by chance" (they like you to know the discovery was down to their adventurousness, as opposed to adherence to any guidebook), and it turns out to be so far removed from your own idea of perfect that you wonder if it is your friend who is mad or you.

I think of the "remote" holiday cottage which a close friend of my mother had showered with plaudits. We sang with excitement all the way there. What we found was a mighty Tesco on its doorstep and a riches of prissiness – a broderie-anglaise bow round the fridge handle wasn't the worst of it. True, the view was down and wide, as views should be, but down and wide did not make it good.

I think of *The Time Traveller's Wife*, which many a friend whose

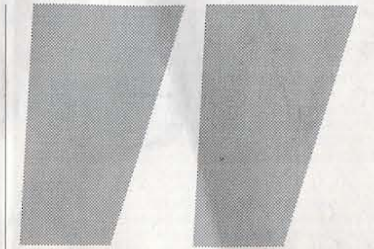
literary taste I respect has begged me to read. I had abandoned it on page 50. I thought it was twaddle.

It is a wise and brave person who resists bowing to the pressure of recommendations, even from trusted family and friends. Recommendations are always beguiling, but usually dodgy. Dodgy because they depend on taste, obviously, which is flammable, as well as the even less reliable intangibles of personal circumstance, time and mood.

My friends in Brussels are not risking cheap and charming – they have opted instead for expensive Spanish hotels on the principle that the likelihood of them being good is marginally in their favour. Throwing money at the problem is, of course, no guarantee: they may yet end up in hotel hell, with foam pillows, chintz-stiff bedspreads, filthy coffee and disagreeable staff. But at least they won't have to question their own sanity or that of any of their friends, and will have only themselves to blame.

● On the way home on Eurostar, I rang my husband and caught him having his own illicit moment. For a dreary November afternoon, he sounded inordinately merry – and slightly sleepy.

But it's all in the name of work. Having



recently been commissioned to do some photography in the Everest region, he was advised by someone in his office to go in for simulated altitude training. Hence, his current daily trysts with a man in Covent Garden and an oxygen mask.

Hourly sessions of reduced oxygen for three weeks are, according to his trainer, going to make his body better able to cope when he hits Nepal at 6,000 metres. I always thought that altitude sickness was feeling a bit queasy up a mountain, but the symptoms listed in my husband's Everest guidebook, of which death is just one, are seriously scary. And so it is that he is able, via a filter with compressed air, to go six times in 60 minutes to the equivalent of the top of Kilimanjaro and back – all the while still seated and a stone's throw from the Royal Opera House.

According to his trainer, he is undergoing a cellular workout which, just like a muscular one, produces serotonin and dopamine in the body. As a result, Donovan is calm, relaxed and in excellent humour, and is much enjoying the vivid colours he sees after each session. I could almost recommend it.

Andrew O'Hagan is away