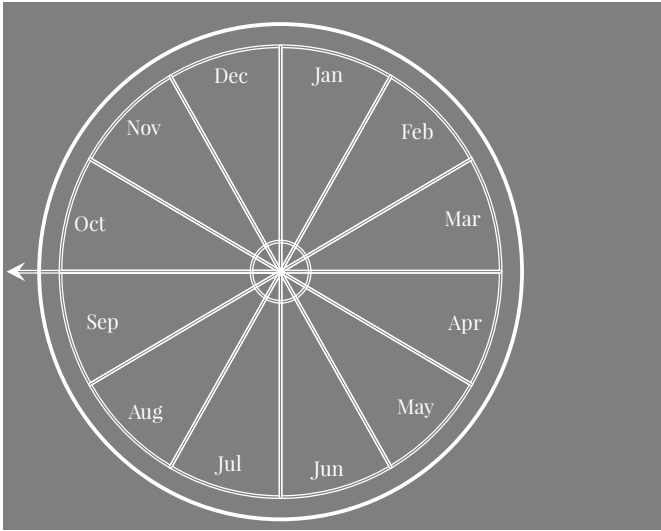
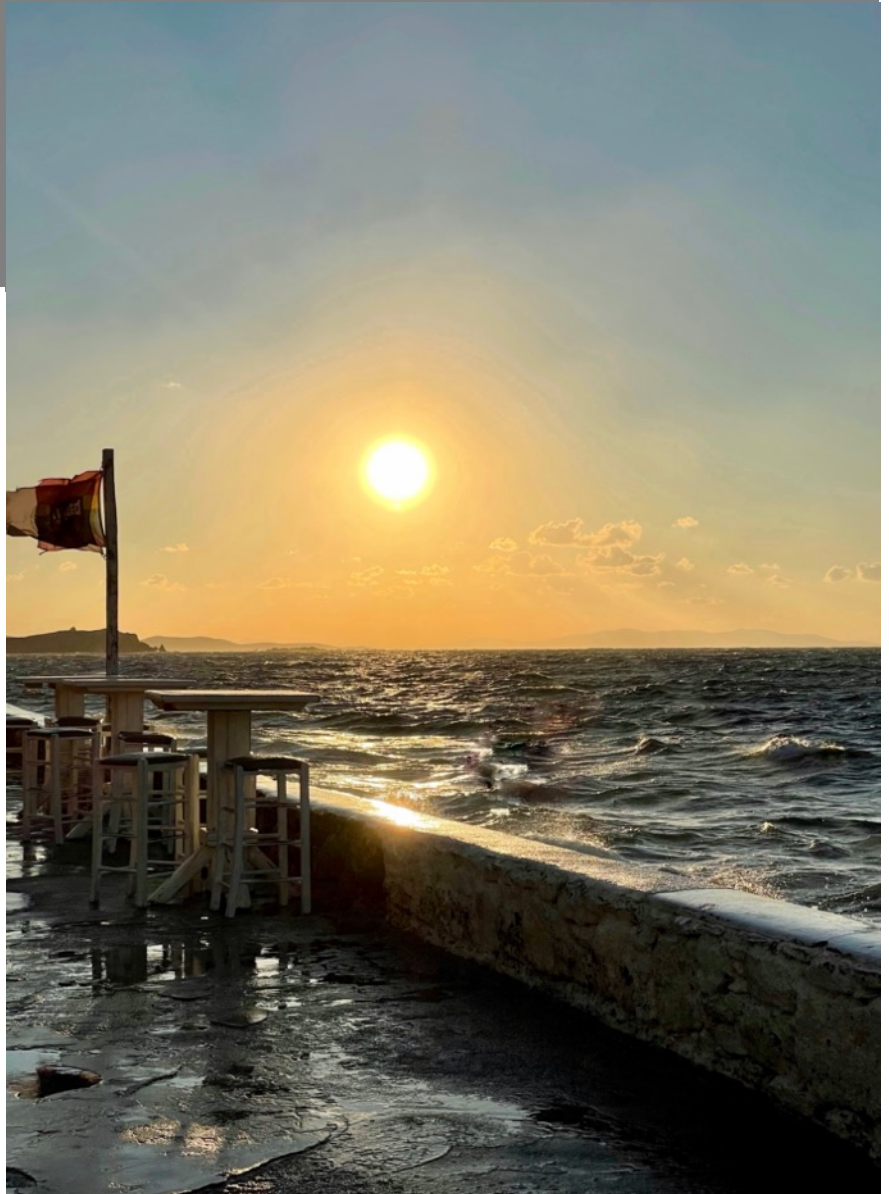


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After an almost 18 month hiatus of social & global cross-border camaraderie, it feels that the planet is finally returning to its pre-COVID state.

However, the pandemic has cast a long shadow over the notion of a truly globalised world. Before COVID-19, the concept of structural wealth disparity between countries and continents was a remote one, only really contemplated on a regular basis by economists, philanthropic organisations and geopolitical experts. But global disasters and tragedies can have a distilling effect, whereby the good and bad become more apparent.

Before the panic of coronavirus, the impression of wealth disparity was that it was amongst individuals; the targets of those warning of such a disparity were an increasingly international and less parochial elite class of wealthy individuals, who travelled frequently and conducted themselves quite independently from the concerns of nations or peoples. However, what the pandemic has truly illuminated is the far greater gulf between “rich” nations and “poor” nations. Countries in Europe and the USA may have contended with lockdown protestors, vaccine hesitancy &

rejection, not to mention temporarily shrunken economies, but by comparison with many other parts of the world, this is tantamount to a luxury experience. Many Governments in Europe and the USA have provided generous safety nets for their citizens and businesses. Hospitals have been challenged, but rarely overwhelmed. The best vaccines on the planet have been available to everyone, for free. And when their citizens have demanded freedom – as is their right in accountable, working democracies – these Governments, fearing a loss of popularity, have responded.

Other parts of the world have not had it so easy, and this has become very apparent even to those who do not typically pay attention to such things. One of these examples is the number of countries in the world that are almost entirely reliant on COVAX – in other words, entirely dependent on wealthy countries donating doses to them. Current and former world leaders have even called upon Europe and the USA to donate even more for this cause.

There is no accident to where the wealthy base themselves, and this pandemic has highlighted just how stark the differences between the world’s inhabitable places can be.



Knowledge.
Perspective.
Passion.

Barton

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FINDING

CONTRAST

Under the shade of a palm tree, overlooking the brown, sun-weary, in-land wine country of a Balearic island, I found myself reading the short autobiographical work of the 20th century actor George Sanders – *Memoirs of a Professional Cad*.

One passage in particular appealed to me in which he described his return to Buenos Aires after spending time on ranches in Patagonia.

“Buenos Aires was to me, on my return, an entirely new world. After my primitive existence in Patagonia, I was in perfect health and savored everything I saw and experienced. I remember standing on a corner of the Plaza de Mayo, my mouth hanging open like some country bumpkin, staring at the myriad bright lights of the city, the sleek powerful cars, the elegantly dressed women. For a full two weeks this wonderful feeling, almost like being born again, invested all of my activities. I was sharply aware of the worried faces of the men who hurried by me on the street, carrying the inevitable brief cases. They, on the other hand, seemed to notice nothing around them. So it was that from this experience I arrived at the conclusion that to enjoy one’s life to the fullest, one must build contrast into it. And the more extreme the contrast the fuller the life”

This resonated with me in particular for its sophisticated comprehension of the relative and connected nature of our existence, but also for its humility in perceiving the damaging effect that a lack of perspective, or contrast, has.

This seems to come down to a sense of ‘oddness’ that is essential for us to experience in order for us to be truly aware of what we are doing. For example, daily routines entirely lack oddness because they are performed almost mechanically without any sensory stimulation. The idea of “normality” is only our own, however much we may think it is shared.

Travel is so loved because it is, for most, the exact opposite of a routine. It possesses excitement, adventure and risk. When we go somewhere for the very first time, we are in a fortunate group – the feeling of seeing, smelling and hearing somewhere you haven’t been before is very intoxicating. But so is returning to a familiar place after a long while, particularly one that has only existed in our memories and other souvenirs in the time since.

But the sense of contrast is always important – and has always been important – to luxury consumers, in order to truly *feel* the impact of luxury.

“ ‘The first sip’ he said ‘was like a miracle.’ But it wasn’t the fact that it was Champagne that made it such a luxury, it was because it was cold...”

The idea of a “full life”, as Sanders put it, is one that recognises good fortune and encourages gratitude, but also one which has multi-sensory appreciation of the different textures of life, not all of which are comfortable. Luxury vehicles, for example, are often focused on for their brand’s exclusivity, or the rarity of a certain model or even colour. But at the heart of it is the experience itself. The disarming quietness of a Rolls-Royce is one of its greatest assets because it enables a *feeling* of luxury; a noisy, dirty city is the perfect foil for such a vehicle, enabling the passenger to feel cocooned from the hustle and bustle, shielded and protected. But it is often the contrast with discomfort itself which forces this feeling of luxury.

In the same vein, one luxury consumer once informed me of a trek they took on a tour through dusty and dry terrain, with insects and relentless heat. As they neared the end of this sweaty journey, they walked into a clearing with a modest set-up of rather plain tables with white cloths and wooden chairs, where they were met by a diffident servant in a crisp white uniform who poured extremely cold Champagne into two chilled glasses. “The first sip”, he said, “was like a miracle.” But it wasn’t the fact that it was Champagne that made it such a luxury, it was because it was cold.

The trouble is that building contrast into a consumer experience can be a tricky and rather dangerous thing. It is far easier to achieve using experiences, such as travel. For example, spending two nights in a remote wilderness can feel like far more of a luxury to city dwellers than country dwellers because it is so different. Luxury hotel resorts can send clients on wild and relatively uncomfortable cultural exploration tours, and then welcome them back into air-cooled, stone-walled havens of comfort.

From the brand’s point of view, it is less easy to attempt to craft this feeling of contrast into luxury goods. Expectations of luxury within this sector are of consistent quality, and remarkable levels of craftsmanship. The product experience itself cannot be one of contrast; you cannot have a beautiful leather holdall compromised by intentionally substandard packaging. There are, however, other sensory ways to inject contrast into such goods by comparison with the environment that surrounds the consumer. For example, the hand of a special fabric or material can often feel highly sensual and out of the everyday, creating a contrast between it and the other daily materials with which the consumer interacts, or it can also be a visual aspect such as a unique pattern which stands out. Such micro-contrasts can build the impression in the consumer’s mind of a sense of the distinction of that product, which lies at the heart of luxury.

Sector updates



Image: Instagram/@nusr_et

The arrival of **Nusr-Et** onto the London restaurant scene feels rather like the return of the pre-financial crisis era of arrogant restaurant tabs. Although calling it a steak restaurant is a bit like calling Harrods a corner shop, it is an establishment which celebrates the indulgence of red meat, sometimes covered in edible real gold - rather out of trend with the move towards healthy living, free-from menus and concerns about sustainable farming. Having conquered just about every other hub of wealth going, SaltBae (real name Nusret Gokce) turned his sites on what he termed “the heart of the world.” Within the opening days, a wine-free receipt for 8 guests amounting to £1800 (£225 each) showed that when it comes to pricey steaks in the capital, they will take some beating. However it is the savvy location in golden-car Knightsbridge which impresses Barton the most.

The CEO of **Kering**, Francois-Henri Pinault, has made the decision to ditch fur across the entire luxury group of brands. Starting from the autumn collections of 2022, none of the group’s maisons will use fur. A statement read “The time has now come to take a further step forward by ending the use of fur in all our collections. The world has changed, along with our clients, and luxury naturally needs to adapt to that.” This is a momentous decision as although many brands have phased out the use of fur - following from Stella McCartney’s *very* early example - it rules out completely any use of it in future (even if there is a change of creative direction) and also puts pressure on rivals such as LVMH, who leave the use of fur to the discretion of each brand in its stable. Anti-fur campaigners have long targeted luxury brands, but this move - in Barton’s view - comes from a change in genuine luxury consumers.



Image: Kering



Image: LVMH

Luxury used to be a middle-aged game. Once you’d made your money, achieved a position and income you were proud of, that’s when you seriously started rewarding yourself with baubles. Nowadays, even teenagers are engaging with best-of-breed luxury brands. Increasingly exposed to it through privileged upbringings and comfortable lives, not to mention a digital-social landscape that practically engineers them into being ferocious consumers, the young are shifting to the heart of luxury brands’ consideration. LVMH has announced it aims to recruit 25,000 people under the age of 30 by the end of 2022. Barton thinks this age-biased drive reveals how determined the group is to avoid any of its well-tended garden of brands dying on the vine, but also that it is a sign of how the biggest luxury goods group sees the future of luxury, as one which is more responsive and less condescending to inexperienced consumers. The knock-on effect of this will be one to watch.