

Trip 5 – Episode #6 – San Simeon and Citizen Hearst

In our house, it was an accepted fact that Citizen Kane was the best movie ever made. My father said so, and he knew a thing or two about movies, therefore it was true.

So, when Jim and I finally went to Hearst Castle, I had to keep reminding myself that the creator of all this was William Randolph Hearst, not Charles Foster Kane.

We had driven by the castle a couple of times during our trips up and down the Pacific Coast Highway last year. But it was closed, first because of COVID and later because of damage to the road that snakes its way up to the castle atop the hill.

Finally, this time it was open, and so of course, we had to go.



It is a huge attraction, and although it wasn't very busy the day we went, you could tell they're set up for a steady flow of tourists.

After checking in to the visitor centre and buying tickets, you're guided to a bus that takes you up the hill to the castle.



You can just barely make out some turrets and the surrounding palm trees above the trees.



The narrow, twisty road is 5 miles long. We were glad we weren't driving it in Charles.



During the bus ride, there's a recorded narration. It begins, "Hi, this is Alex Trebek", which I thought was kind of creepy.

Alex told us that Hearst's father had bought the land after striking it rich mining silver, and he mostly used the land to raise cattle, who had free range over the thousands of acres.

When he was a young boy, "Willy" and his parents would hike, or ride horseback up to the top of the hill and "camp" (which meant that their people would go up a few days ahead of time and set up camp for them). Willy loved going there, and when he inherited it, he decided to make it more comfortable, so he and his family and friends could comfortably spend time more there. He started dreaming, and then he started building.

So devoted to nature was Hearst that rather than take down any of the old live oak trees that were in the way of his plans, he would have them uprooted and moved – a decision that cost tens of thousands of dollars.

To help him realize his dream, Hearst hired a young hot-shot architect named Julia Morgan.

Many of the descriptions of Hearst bore no resemblance to the Charles Foster Kane I knew, but there was one way in which they were similar: While building the castle, Hearst was constantly changing his plans, never satisfied, always wanting to make things bigger and more extravagant. As a result, it was forever being “improved”. Julia Morgan’s job, which was initially just something she’d do on weekends in between other work, went on for 26 years. And changes to the castle only stopped when Hearst was too old and feeble to go there.

The result is something magnificent, and reminiscent of Versailles and other monuments to one person’s vanity. But, it is a wonder.



This is just one of the three guest houses.



Even though it was a gloomy day, the views were spectacular.





Our guide was charming, professional, obviously loved her job and gave us lots of information about Kane ... er Hearst.



This was the outdoor pool. The last of three attempts to get it right. It was for the kids.
(He had five. They would come and visit in the summer.)





The gardens, everywhere, were lovely. The fragrance in the air was luscious.





As we made our way toward the Casa Grande, we passed all kinds of art, which we were told had been found and brought from around the world. It literally is a museum.







Although many of the features of the architecture and décor were fashioned after great art from history, many were actual antiquities that were sourced and purchased. These pieces, for instance, date from the New Kingdom of Egypt (c. 1550-1070 BCE) and are the oldest works of art here.



Finally, we arrived at Casa Grande, looking more like a cathedral than a home.
Which was, of course, the intent.



She took us around to the side entrance, and we got to see some of the “Grand Rooms”.



With art and furniture and tapestries from around the world, they were indeed grand.





In the dining room, we were told that Hearst would invite all kinds of people – movie stars, politicians, athletes, and anybody he thought would bring interesting conversation to the table. Apparently, guests would generally start off sitting near the middle of the long dining table, beside Hearst or Marion Davies, and then, at successive meals, they would find themselves seated farther away. When you were at the end of the table, you knew it was time to leave.



For me, though, this overly long table takes me right to that scene in *Citizen Kane* when he and the Marion Davies character sat at opposite ends of that long table, eating in silence. Apparently, that was not the case in the real Hearst Castle. Meals were full of lively conversation and Hearst was the life of the party.

The ketchup and mustard, we were told, were reminders that this was still a “camp”, and apparently meals weren’t necessarily exotic.



There were two more rooms for after-dinner entertainment and conversation.





Although this looks like a piano, it's where they played the carillon in the towers.



And then to the theatre, where Hearst insisted everyone go after the after-dinner drinks. He would show first-run movies and then the guests would discuss the movie into the wee hours.



Our guide showed a series of clips of some of the guests who came to play at the castle. Of course, it was a who's who of the most desirable celebrities of the time.

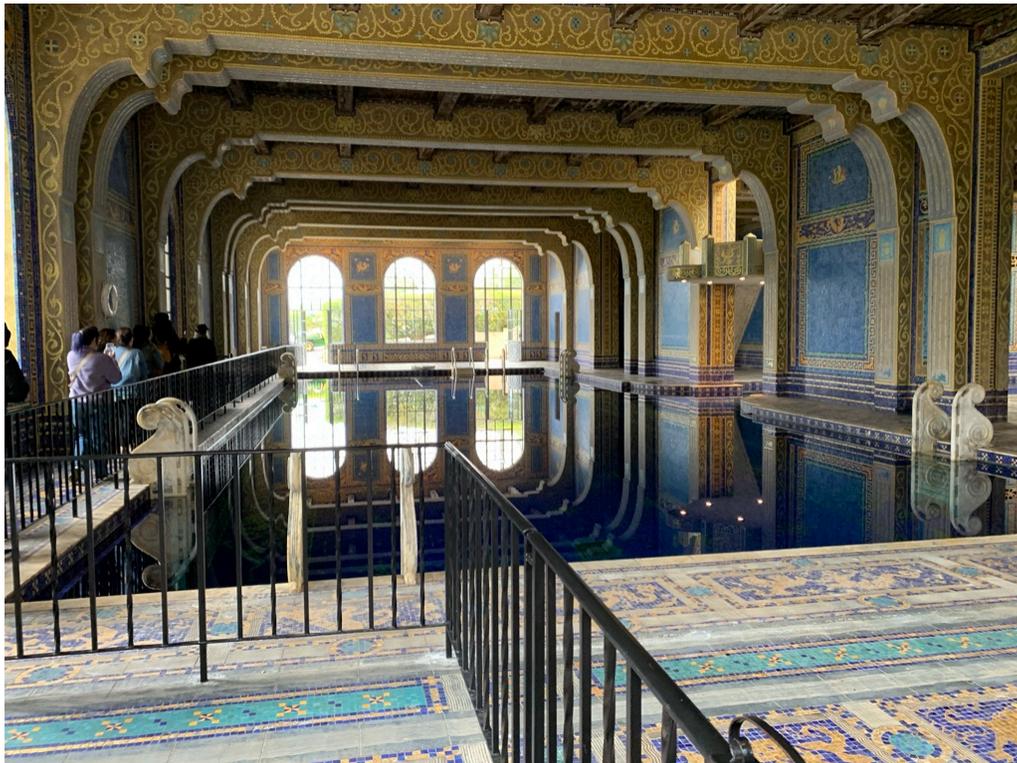
Yes, that's Charlie Chaplin singing to Marion Davies, and accompanying himself on the tennis racquet.



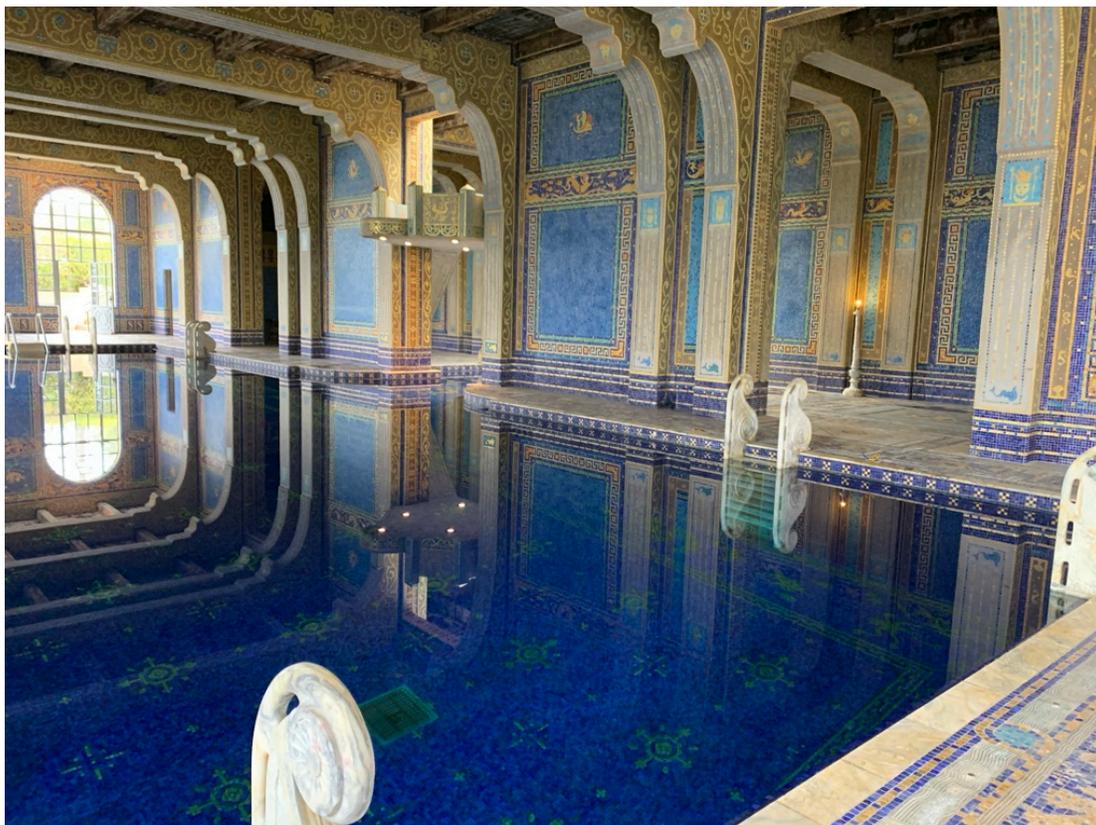
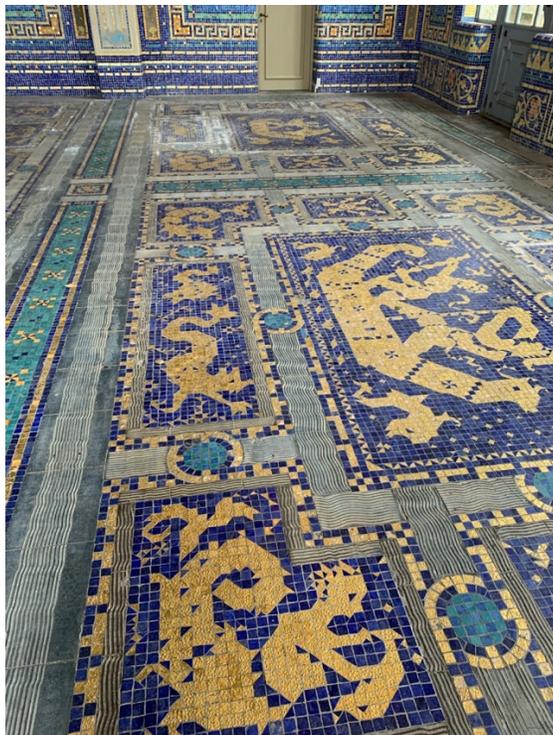
And finally, the pièce de résistance, in a place filled with pièces de résistance. Underneath the tennis courts...



... was the indoor pool.



And yes, the gold
in the tiles is gold.



When the tour was over, we boarded the bus and Alex told us a few more stories during the long and winding road back to the Visitors' Centre. He was adamant that we much watch the documentary there. Of course, we're going to do what Alex tells us.

To our surprise, the documentary was narrated by another Canadian – Donald Sutherland. And shown on a Canadian invention: IMAX.

It's really quite a well-produced movie, called "Hearst Castle: Building the Dream". Like the castle itself, the movie spared no expense, showing young Willy and his mother travelling throughout Europe, where he apparently acquired his appreciation for great art and architecture. And then, re-enacting the incredible, unending process of building Hearst Castle.

In the movie, and throughout the tour, no mention of Hearst's sensationalist newspapers, Yellow Journalism, brutal business tactics, or his final years of financial loss and seclusion, and only minimal reference to his mostly failed attempts to run for office. Instead, we saw a man who was driven, a builder who loved the creative process and thrived on bringing people together.

In short, nothing like Charles Foster Kane.

And never, not once, was there a reference to Rosebud.