

A journey into unknown with intrepid female traveller who braved Afghanistan's badlands

Where do you take a publisher-turned-writer who is daring enough to venture off the beaten track in the Middle East? **Joseph Connolly** settles on Verru in Marylebone – billed as Scandinavian but straying into other territories ...

» We go way back, Magsie and me. In the 1990s, Magsie Hamilton Little was my non-fiction publisher – first at Mitchell Beazley, where I did a book called *Beside The Seaside* (all about, as you may have divined, the British seaside, and packed with terrific photographs, both vintage and modern) and then at Cassell: another picture book entitled *All Shook Up*, about the 1950s. It was around this time, I recall, that Magsie became really quite fed up with working for conglomerates: she is not the first editorial director to have rebelled at all her time being taken up with meetings, budgeting and office politics, leaving none at all for the very point of creative publishing: the authors and the books. And so she decided to form her own company. Now look ... down the years, I've met so many people who are constantly on the verge of doing something or other really major and life-changing: writing a novel, travelling the world, saving the planet, writing a novel, breaking into television, becoming the MasterChef champion, writing a novel, working with Spielberg, starting a magazine, writing a novel ... you bump into them a couple of years down the line, and their spiel and ambitions remain exactly the same – but stalled, of course, because 'the time isn't right' and 'the climate is wrong'.

True grit

Well Magsie isn't one of those: she decided to create a publishing house called Little Books, and within less than a year the imprint's first six publications were on the shelves of Waterstone's. She has published many hundreds since then and now – for the first time – she has written one of her own. Not a novel, but an extraordinary memoir of her solo (many would say reckless, foolhardy or just plain crazy) journey into the badlands of Afghanistan.

The book – *Dancing With Darkness* – comes garlanded with praise: "This is a remarkable document by a very gifted writer" says Alexander McCall Smith. Matthew Parris of *The Times* calls it "an extraordinary book by an extraordinary woman". It is indeed a very uplifting story that still manages to be a tragedy, as well as a serious page-turner. Her life throughout is constantly in danger, saved only by her own true grit and – somewhat ironically – the wearing of the full burka. "That was maybe the



■ Small but beautiful ... Joseph Connolly is impressed with the food and decor at Verru.

Main photo by Jonathan Goldberg

'Wearing the full burka was maybe the worst bit: they are so very heavy and hot. You can't see where you are going through the mesh'

worst bit: they are so very heavy and hot," she told me. "You can't see where you are going through the mesh ... but inside you are anonymous and invisible". As I write, the book is at number one in Amazon's travel writing chart, and a film deal is under discussion.

Cool pale wood

And so over lunch I say to her "It would make a cracking film: who should play yourself, do you think?". She smiles impishly: "Danny de Vito. You. Dawn French. It really doesn't matter when you're stuck inside a burka". We were sitting in Verru, billed as a 'Scandinavian' restaurant in Marylebone Lane, that attractive little dog-leg off the High Street that is just jammed with places to eat. I know, I know ... I should have taken her somewhere Afghan, but I couldn't find anywhere. Persian was the closest, and that's not really close at all. So ... let's instead go for contrast, shall we? From the heat and dust of the Afghan odyssey to the cool pale wood and likeable freshness of this tiny little restaurant.

There is a wall of mottled mirror which helps a bit, but it truly is small: to access the back bit down a few stairs you have to walk through the full-height wine rack. Bronze leather buttoned banquettes, elephant grey hide chairs and blonde parquet – the lighting is very fifties, with black conical shades lined in gold: I like it all. There is also syncopated jazz that is reasonably easy to ignore.

Good set lunch deal

There isn't a huge amount on this menu that screams Scandinavia: there is Scandinavian crayfish bisque, Icelandic cod, Swedish meatballs ... and that's about it. So I thought I'd put a question to the extremely polite, efficient and friendly waiter: "What nationality is this restaurant, actually?" "I am Polish". "Uh-huh – and the restaurant?" "Scandinavian". "Uh-huh. But ... specifically?" "Estonian". "Estonian? Estonia isn't in Scandinavia ..." "No. But the chef is. Or he isn't now. Now he's downstairs". I see. Yes – that would be Andrei Lesment, late of two very

good restaurants indeed: Pied a Terre and Maze. Dishes are actually rather pricey, though there is an extraordinarily good set lunch deal: a starter and a main for £10.95, and five choices for each course. Magsie, I have to tell you, is an extremely modest and selfless woman – once she saw the set lunch, I could not persuade her to even glance at the carte. And she wouldn't appear in the photograph accompanying this piece, so you're stuck with just my bloody mug again: sorry. "I'm just not photogenic", she said: absolute nonsense, of course – she's very lovely – but what can you do? Genuine English reserve. I just about got her to accept a glass of white wine: house, of course – wouldn't look at the others. But actually, this set lunch menu was so appealing, I ordered from it myself: Swedish meatballs (as in Ikea, I suppose) followed by Angus beef schnitzel with potato puree and peas. The five meatballs came sizzling in a little iron skillet in a tomato sauce and were truly sensational: hot and yielding and full of good pork-and-beefy

flavour, sensitively seasoned. An odd sort of starter, but still. Magsie went for gravlax which came, somewhat tautologically, with Hovmaster (dill) sauce, red onion toast and a sliced boiled egg. This all looked very pretty, and she rather enjoyed it – "light, fresh and a lovely salmon flavour" is what she said.

Perfectly breadcrumbed

I've never actually had a beef (as opposed to veal, chicken or turkey) schnitzel, and I was fairly wary. Turned out to be magnificent – large, tender, and perfectly breadcrumbed. The pomme puree and gravy too were just about faultless. Quite as generous and flavoursome was Magsie's chargrilled frikandel (pork sausage) with beluga lentils – so called because they're meant to be black and glistening like caviar, but rarely are: more translucently grey. The sausage was huge, and damned good: spicy, but not palate-threateningly so. Magsie said she was stuffed – as was I. So I ordered a hazelnut millefeuille with chocolate mousse: the three-tiered millefeuille light and crunchy, the gooey hazelnut not very nutty at all. The mousse was first rate, though – as was the bonus of an unadvertised chocolate pannacotta: the value of this meal was truly amazing. Magsie said to the waiter: "I'd like some tea. What's the most popular tea in Estonia?" He smiled. "English Breakfast". "And in Poland ...?" He smiled. "Eng-

FACT FILE

- VERRU
69 Marylebone Lane, W1
Tel: 020-7935 0858
- Open daily noon-3pm, 6pm-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Set lunch starter and main £10.95: fantastic value. Otherwise, about £110 for three course meal for two, with wine.

lish Breakfast". So that's what she had (lemon, no milk).

Children's charity work

And so now her book is written and published, Magsie is taking it easy, is she? Not quite. She's planning another one, while attending to her publishing house and seeing to a charity she has set up for the benefit of Afghan children (to which all profits from *Dancing With Darkness* are being directed; the book's dedication runs thus – 'For the children of Afghanistan, the brightest lights in the darkest nights'). In addition, she has printed thousands of beautiful little colouring books which she sends to Afghanistan, all at her own expense. "It's wonderful," she says. "I get all these letters from children thanking me – saying it's the very first book they've ever owned". And obviously she's also making marmalade. She did this for the first time last year and won a silver medal in the – get this – 'International Marmalade Awards'. This year, she's going for gold: the winning preserve will be sold in Fortnum & Mason, and she's determined that it shall be hers: I've suggested she calls it Magsie's Marmers. And oh yes – she's studying for a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies, and still she continues to play her beloved cello and spinet. "Music," she says wistfully, "always sees me through. The worst bit about Afghanistan, you know ... it wasn't actually the burka, no. The worst bit was that they didn't really have Bach ..."

■ **DANCING WITH DARKNESS** by Magsie Hamilton Little is published by Max Press (£8.99). For more about the charity, see www.littlebooksafghanistan.org. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.