
TASCHEN 4 Cities*By Angelika Taschen*

Boxed sets of books used to be humble affairs: three or four mass-market paperbacks of *All Creatures Great and Small* or *The Lord of the Rings*, given as Christmas presents to your aunt in Des Moines or your nephew at Southern Methodist University. Leave it to TASCHEN publishers to re-invent the genre as a glossy art object.

The cube-like box for *4 Cities* is as colorful as a museum-gift-shop Matisse: designer blue, purple, pink, and pea-green motifs, matching the slender spines of the slender books within. Three books per city (New York, Paris, London, Berlin) for a total of twelve volumes—each about 4¾ by 6¾ inches—booklets almost. Inside are mainly photographs, with text limited to a paragraph or two of breezy description (in English, German, and French—the triple translations beef things up a bit.) Still, a handsome enough gift-set with excellent photography, design, bindings, etc.

Author Angelika Taschen has chosen three themes: "Hotels," "Shops," and "Restaurants, Bars & Cafés," thus insuring that *4 Cities* will resemble the print version of an infomercial. Targeted readership? That familiar shuffling herd of the rich and super-rich that keeps Tiffany & Co., Claridge's, and La Maison Guerlain in business. To be fair, *4 Cities* includes a number of small shops and cafés plausible to non-millionaires. But for the most part, the boxed set feels like a wish-book for fashionistas, American stockbrokers, and displaced *Mittel-European* nobility. The next time you're in Paris, for example, don't forget to book a three-bedroom Imperial suite at the Hôtel Ritz—for only 13,900 euros per night.

Gourmands may find it odd that only a few of the photographs of restaurants contain pictures of food—even the Paris volume—most are interior shots of table settings and dining rooms. That's like a book on Marilyn Monroe consisting of pictures of her clothes closet. At least the New York volume contains a magnificent corned beef on rye, next to an equally awe-inspiring pastrami on rye, from Katz's Delicatessen, a famous Lower East Side sandwich joint, which, as it happens, is the most democratic and appealing institution in the entire set.

To my surprise, the "Shops" section of all four cities featured local TASCHEN bookstores. This seemed egregious, like the editor of a poetry anthology including a dozen of his own poems, especially for an enterprise of so-called international hauteur. Then I remembered that TASCHEN is the publisher of *The Big Book of Breasts*, *The Big Butt Book*, *The Big Book of Pussy*, and a trove of other literary classics. Well, hurrah for naked people, I say, and saying that, I decide to quit worrying about an over-cooked confection like *4 Cities*. Best just to lean back and enjoy the pictures.



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