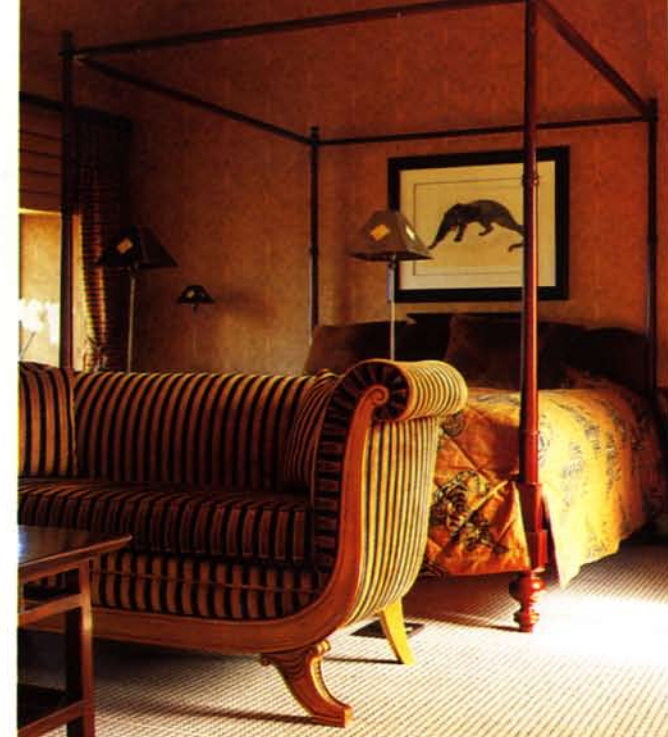


VICTORIA'S WEEKEND HOP



Rocco Forte and design director of his RF Hotels, has an elegant grasp of both. It serves her well at the Hotel Tresanton in St Mawes and even better here. You walk in and want to live at Endsleigh.

The country house hotel was intended to be the fantasy country house idyll, sans the leaking roof, back-breaking gardening and boring staff problems, for those who didn't have a country house of their own. Of course, the whole concept of the real country house has changed. The real country house was savagely uncomfortable, freezing cold, had one lavatory per 20 bedrooms and you were insane to expect more than two inches of lukewarm bathwater. Indeed, it was a social solecism to run any more. The Duchess of Bedford very possibly disapproved of anyone having a bath at all.

Fast forward three decades into decadence. The Polizzis, *mère et fille*, know how to make one feel and be comfortable. There are delicious books in the drawing room (a lot of PG Wodehouse, surely the heartbeat of a country house); wander into the little bar and you help yourself and write it down in a book. This is sociable informality. The children's parterre is bordered by a stone trough through which water burbles; generations of small Bedfords raced little model boats there.

Throughout, the colours are cool and soothing: Paint Library aqua greens, duck-egg blues, and my bedroom is creamy and dove colours. The fluffy towel factor, the uber-high threadcount of my sheets (like sleeping on a cloud), the linen curtains and the deep baths are all immaculate. Luxury is interior decoration that doesn't suffocate, but calms. Even the pottery in the old wooden cabinets oozes style. It is local, matt and white, not the ditsy, flowery bits of porcelain that shriek Sloane.

Alex's idea of a picnic lunch is my idea of heaven. It is all local produce: Devonian prosciutto ham from Denhay, crab claws from Looe, clotted cream, fruit from the Tamar Valley. The salmon is Scottish, but smoked here, the icy rosé is a last sip of summer, together with the scent of late-flowering roses from the garden which Repton considered to be "the most picturesque subject on which I have ever been professionally consulted".

An old man in 1815, he wrote apologising to the Duke "that I could only become acquainted with [the garden's]

recondite beauties by being carried to places otherwise inaccessible to a cripple". This is a garden of valleys, cascades and pools; the whole area is becoming a World Heritage site. Later, sitting reading on my terrace, I imagine the gratified ghost of the old, crippled man who created the Arcadia around me in the year before the Battle of Waterloo.

Much later, I have a charming dinner in the panelled dining room: imaginative modern food that isn't trying too hard. You also have the reassuring feeling that, if you said you'd just like a scrambled egg, no one would bat an eyelid. Indeed, I have perfect scrambled egg for breakfast, on my terrace as Bubble rolls on the grass. Then I am whirled away, with much the same feelings about leaving Endsleigh as Mr Blair has about leaving Downing Street: another year there would be good.

It is a short hop to Gloucestershire and Whatley Manor. Below I see the white specks of swans on lakes and the manifestations of 21st-century England: polytunnels versus the revival of the kitchen garden. The mass production is evident, but flying over plum country houses (this is *Country Life* property porn from the air) it's fascinating how many are growing their own veg.

Whatley is posh Glos. It's in Elizabeth Hurley-zone, which includes Jessica Sainsbury's Cowley Manor and Barnsley House. They're all, to a certain extent, spin-offs of Babington House, which mined the rich seam of getting Notting Hill to the country. Notting Hill didn't have to engage with the country, of course (the wellingtons at Whatley are Veuve Clicquot orange, custom-made for the marquis by Hunter, and they have never been formally introduced to mud), because the spa and the cinema kept such a scary prospect at bay.

The Hotels

HOTEL ENDSLEIGH Tavistock, Devon

Suite one, b&b: £360 per night. An overnight stay for two with dinner, drinks and picnic lunch cost £569.50.

01822 870 000, www.hotelendsleigh.com

WHATLEY MANOR Malmesbury, Wiltshire

Suite 12, b&b: £650 per night. An overnight stay for two, including dinner, wine, a pedicure, and La Prairie facial and caviar body treatment cost £1,242.50.

01666 822 888, www.whatleymanor.com

SHARROW BAY Penrith, Cumbria

Harmony Suite, dinner, b&b: £500 per night. An overnight stay, including walking tour and champagne cruise, cost £665.60. A one-night package, including helicopter transfer from London, private champagne cruise on Ullswater, six-course meal with wines selected by the head sommelier, Nicholas Chieze, and breakfast, costs from £2,536pp, based on two sharing and four guests taking the package.

01768 486301, www.vonessenhotels.co.uk