

The cool hotel guide

Howard Arms, Ilmington, Warwickshire

At one of the most northerly points of the Cotswolds, the Howard Arms is in pride of place on the green in the peaceful village of Ilmington. Go through the front door of the late 16th-century main building — with its climbing roses and window boxes — into a bar with a low ceiling and a shiny flagstone floor. On a winter's day, a fire is usually ablaze in a big stone fireplace with two (much sought-after) old leather armchairs facing the flames. Paintings of country scenes hang on the walls and notices by the door advertise summer morris dancing events.

In a nutshell

Last year two local families bought the Howard after seeing their favourite inn decline at the hands of a pub chain. They renovated the eight rooms and decorated throughout, adding works of art, designer lights and soundproofing.



Need to know

What are the rooms like?

They are of a high standard and good value (no chocolate-box Cotswolds rip-off here). Rooms are in the main building or an annexe. The annexe rooms are large, modern and tasteful: patterned wallpaper in some rooms, velveteen armchairs, ceiling spotlights and smart bathrooms with Temple Spa products. The ground-floor Garden Room is the biggest; a sofa bed makes it suitable for families (from £130 B&B). In the main building, Old Beam Room, over the bar, is the smallest, but perfectly

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of the Howard Arms (01608 682226, howardarms.com), Ilmington, Warwickshire CV36 4LT; B&B doubles cost from £110; one wheelchair-access room; £6 single-occupancy discount; no dogs in rooms



comfortable, with exposed beams and a view of the green (from £110 B&B). Also in the old building, the traditional Village Room has tartan curtains and a tan leather sofa (from £130 B&B). Prices go up £20 on Fridays and Saturdays.

Which is the best room?

The Cotswold and the Summer rooms in the rafters in the annexe are spacious and feel tucked away (from £130 B&B).

What's the food like?

Burgers, haddock and chips, and calves'

liver with mash, smoked bacon and mushrooms are among the favourite orders in the bar (which is usually busy with locals). In the restaurant there are about ten starters and main courses, including potted crab, spiced tagine, steaks and cajun chicken and bacon salad. After a particularly strong garlic bread, my mussels with bacon and a Guinness sauce were rich and moreish, but my main of chicken with fondant potatoes, parsnips, beetroot and kale was a bit overcooked and lacked seasoning. The apple and blackberry crumble was one of the best puddings I've eaten this year. Three courses cost from about £25.

Who goes there?

Couples who want a romantic retreat — and walkers.

What else is there to do?

Explore the hills. Book tickets to see a production in Stratford-upon-Avon, seven miles away. Sit by the fire with a warming pint of Stratford Gold bitter (£3.60)... and listen to the village gossip.

The highs, the lows, the verdict

Eight and a half out of ten This is a fine example of a sympathetic makeover of a village pub, with comfortable rooms and tasteful decor, but it's not for the über-hip design hotel crowd.

Tom Chesshyre

Do you agree?

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