

R&R

A monthly column exploring the perfect location to clear your head and spend quality time with the 'lovely one' in your life

This month **Sara Chardin** (Travel Blogger at allaboardtheskylark.com) visits **The Howard Arms at Ilmington**

Rescued by two local families, who took the decision to give a fading pub a new lease of life, The Howard Arms has only recently reopened after an extensive refurbishment.

Dating back to the 16th century, this pub with rooms overlooks the village green in the peaceful Warwickshire village of Ilmington. As we discovered, it's a great location for exploring the north Cotswolds. The quintessentially beautiful villages of Broadway and Chipping Campden, and historic Stratford-upon-Avon, are all within 10 miles.

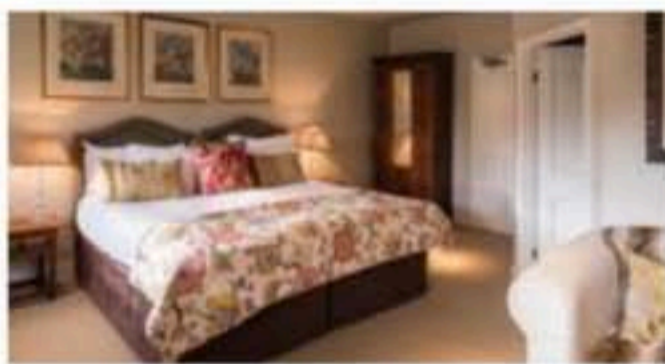
We arrived on a wintery afternoon. Inside the flagstone-floored bar, the fire was lit and a family was enjoying a late lunch. We received a warm welcome and were shown upstairs to our room.

The Country Room, room 2, is in the old part of the pub, overlooking the green and the Cotswold-stone village. The room felt cosy, yet spacious and had a contemporary, country style. Home comforts include free Wi-Fi, Temple Spa toiletries, a smart TV, kettle and comfy sofa. We immediately spotted the homemade biscuits and polished these off with a cup of tea.

Four of the eight rooms are located in the original pub, the others are in the new extension. I had a peek at the Summer Room, in the new part, up in the eaves. This was decorated in a more contemporary way, with a walk-in bathroom.

A wander around the village, unearthed another pub – The Red Lion- and an impressive village store. The Ilmington Community Store is located in a former Catholic church and is more like a farm shop, than a typical corner store. It includes a café and a great selection of vegetables, groceries and locally made cakes.

Retreating back to the warmth of the Howard Arms, we were shown to our table for dinner in the dining room. It was softly lit and the décor gave me the



impression I was sitting in a rather lovely country-house dining room.

The chef, Gavin Rufus, gained 2 AA rosettes at The King's Hotel in Chipping Campden and he's already won a rosette here. I was saving myself for one of the delicious-sounding puddings, so decided to skip the starter.

My partner chose the ham hock terrine, which went down a treat. Not able to resist a forkful, I found the meaty terrine gently flavoured with herbs. It was served with a warm scotch quail's egg, braised young leeks and homemade piccalilli. The accompanying toasted, seeded bread could have done with some butter but this was quickly remedied by our waitress.

The highlight of my whole stay was my

main course. Yes, really. This is one of the best restaurant dishes I've had in a long time. The Barbary duck breast arrived soft and pink, sitting on a sage and onion potato cake, which was soft in the middle, crispy on the edges.

The duck was accompanied by sweet morsels of golden beetroot, baby roast parsnips, parsnip purée and a gorgeous helping of bacony cabbage. The whole thing was rounded off with a rich, meaty jus. It elicited some genuine oohs and aahs from me, something normally only reserved for the tastiest of puddings.

My partner's homemade burger had a chargrilled flavour and was topped with melted cheddar, smokey bacon and tomato relish. He enjoyed tucking into this and the bucket of skinny chips.

For dessert, I chose Bakewell tart with homemade cherry ice cream. The warm tart had a soft frangipane centre and whole morello cherries soaked in amaretto. It was delicious and comforting, although a little sweet. My partner's white and dark chocolate cheesecake was pleasingly chocolatey, surrounded by a pool of strawberry compote.

We found the waiting staff helpful and friendly. The recommended Jarrah Wood Australian Shiraz was a great choice to wash down all that food. We had aimed to share a cheese board and some port but were just too full to manage anything else. Instead we found ourselves a seat in the busy bar.

After a restful night's sleep, in the big, comfy bed, it was time for more food. The tasty, full English of local bacon and sausage, came with all the trimmings including fried bread and confit tomatoes. This set us up very nicely indeed for the journey home. We vowed to return. ■

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