

WHERE TO STAY



THE WEEKENDER

THE HOWARD ARMS ILMINGTON, WARWICKSHIRE

WHY STAY? Because this is on the beautiful but more obscure northern fringes of the Cotswolds, and waking up in sleepy Ilmington – the pub runs along one side of the village green – feels a bit like getting a great, big, honey-coloured bear hug.

WHY NOW? April's a glorious time to visit, just as the pub's many hanging baskets and climbing roses are starting to flame into life. Wait a few more weeks and you can have lunch in the garden. It's also a marvellous time of year for walking, whether a gentle stroll through the village to the ancient church of St Mary the Virgin with its original Norman tower, or a circular walk up Ilmington Hill to one of the highest points in Warwickshire, skirting cornfields and rolling pastures. On fine days, it is possible to see all the way to the Malvern Hills.

WHAT IS IT? A recently revamped 400-year-old inn with eight bedrooms just a 15-minute drive from Stratford-upon-Avon. It's the sort of place where a fire burns in the grate year-round and a deliciously dusky half-light saturates every leather-armchair-filled corner.

BEHIND THE SCENES? Bought in 2007 by a pub group called Little Gems, The Howard sat rather neglected until 2015 when it was snapped up by a group of locals, including two farmers, whose wives re-worked the interiors. Keeping its original wonky beams, polished flagstone floors and enormous fireplace, they've added pretty textiles in vibrant colours, botanical wallpapers and a colour palette of Farrow and Ball's Oxford Stone, Elephant's Breath and other earthy hues. Old maps, watercolours and black-and-white photos of village scenes – spot the Morris dancers – are hung throughout the inn.

SLEEP Of its eight bedrooms, the four most traditional are above the pub and the others are in a newer stone annexe. From the latter, I loved the Oak Room with its hand-carved four-poster bed; in the original building, the small, powder-blue Old Beam Room is particularly charming.

EAT The excellent food makes the most of the bountiful local ingredients, and is served in the main bar and in a slightly more formal mezzanine dining area, crowned by two large lanterns shaped like

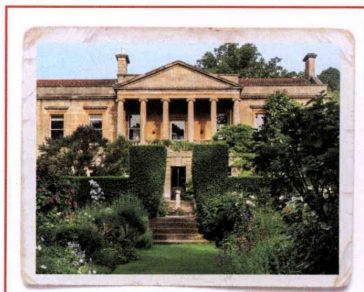
vintage street lamps. Chef Gareth Rufus is impressively adventurous, creating dishes such as goat's-cheese-and-chive soufflé and a brilliant Moroccan spiced tagine. Even better are his Howard Favourites, including burgers with smoked bacon and cheese, and sticky toffee pudding. There are excellent Cotswolds cask ales on tap and a good wine list – try the robust Malbec from Mendoza and the crisp, white Albariño from Galicia. Breakfast is limited to a small range of fruit, yogurt and cereal, embellished with a wondrous smoked haddock and poached eggs.

WHO COMES HERE? Locals; Londoners and other urbanites needing a Cotswolds hit; Shakespeare fans wanting to add another dimension to a theatre break.

WE LIKE Its obvious popularity with the villagers and the fact that manager Rob Jeal likes to say it's a pub that does really good food, rather than a gastro-pub.

WE DON'T LIKE Being left delicious chocolate-chip cookies by the bed. Ruinous on the waist.

CONTACT +44 1608 682226; howardarms.com. Doubles from £110 FRANCESCA SYZ



OUT AND ABOUT

Bag up Fowlers cheese truckles, peppery farm sausages and crumbly fudge at Ilmington's Community Shop and Café on, wait for it, Grump Street. Ramble through the grounds of Hidcote, home to the most influential Arts and Crafts garden in Britain, and Kiftsgate, above, known for the world-famous Kiftsgate rose. In pretty Chipping Campden, head to the 17th-century market place and the Old Silk Mill, an artists' co-operative and exhibition space.