

DIARY OF AN URBAN GRANDAD

With Stan Cullimore



It is a complete delight to pull up outside a pretty hotel after spending a couple of hours in the driving seat. It's a thrill that is hard to beat.

Unless, that is, you get out of the car, sniff the air and realise that this glorious place which is to be your home for the next few nights, has a real wood fire blazing away merrily in the bar, ready to welcome you in with a cheery grin. Sigh. Now that's what I call nice. Really nice. Definitely puts a spring in your step.

Reason I know all this, is because it happened to me the other day when I arrived at The Howard Arms in Ilmington which, in case you have never heard of it, is one of those chocolate box villages just a few clicks north of Bristol, nestled down in the sleepy heart of the Cotswolds.

I was actually working a few miles away, near Stratford on Avon, but had chosen to stay out of town for a couple of very good reasons. Let me explain.

One of the upsides of my lifestyle, is that I get to travel all over the UK

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for work. It is fantastic fun and a treat in anyone's book.

The downside to all this wandering is realising just how many roadworks there are going on at any one time in this little island of ours. Seriously, it's traffic cone city out there. The pesky things are taking over. Just about which ever direction you drive out of Bristol, it seems as if the entire motorway system is one long speed restriction.

Which is why it is such a pleasure to have something waiting for you at the end of the journey. Something that will put a smile on your face and a song in your heart. Which is why I keep an eye out for

interesting, out-of-the-way, top-notch hotels.

In this case, it was a posh pub in a quiet rural backwater that offered fine dining and fantastic bedrooms. The moment it popped up online, I knew it was the one for me. I booked in and got ready for the good times to roll.

The thinking was simple, it would have been easy to go for a bigger and brasher hotel closer to town, slap bang in the middle of town, but there is no way I could have possibly found such a jewel of a place to stay at.

Instead, I would have been forced into taking the obvious way out. Booking myself into one of

those identikit, "does what is says on the tin," type hotel chains. Which is all very well when all you want to do is get some sleep and breakfast before heading off to work. But definitely not the treat for the senses that I was hoping for.

Which brings me back neatly to The Howard Arms. This is definitely not one of your identikit places. It has the adjectives; unique, bijou and exotic, stamped all over it.

After being shown my enormous room, complete with a sofa big enough to live in, a luxury bathroom built for indulgence and a bed which would have looked perfectly at home in any self respecting palace, I took a glance out of one of the windows and found myself staring down at the village green. Now that's what I call, a prime location.

After a short snooze, I headed down to the bar and had a pie and pint followed by a wee dram to help me sleep the night away. In this case, the wee dram was a glass of Apple Brandy, which is made right here in the village itself. Glorious

stuff. Next morning, I met the charming owner over breakfast. Turns out she is a writer and artiste. As fascinating and exotic as her hotel. Her roots go back to the royal family of White Russia, exiting just as the revolution got going.

I could easily have spent the whole day listening to her, but I dragged myself away to go out and explore. The place is a stroller's paradise. With a mix of narrow lanes, back alleys and hidden snickets, all leading out to the rolling Cotswolds, which are right on the doorstep.

As I headed for the hills, I couldn't resist popping in to the community shop and cafe, which, joy of joys, sold the self same local apple brandy I had enjoyed the evening before.

Obviously, I bought myself a bottle as a souvenir and made a solemn promise that when the bottle was empty I would return to get another one. Which would also give me the perfect excuse to revisit The Howard Arms.

Huzzah!

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