

A Secluded Staycation

With changeable quarantine rules around international travel, staycations are proving to be a winner. Giselle Whiteaker finds a delightful off-the-beaten-path hidey-hole in Berkshire.



With quarantine regulations for international destinations going in and out more than the hokey cokey, demand for staycations is skyrocketing. This is great news for the recently opened British tourism industry, but for punters, it's becoming hard to find a place to stay that isn't

overrun. Perhaps now is the time to make the most of what this country has to offer and explore further afield, beyond the seaside resort towns, popular parks and tourist hotspots.

There's not much to the village of Inkpen in West Berkshire, for example, which is precisely why it's so appealing. Passing through Kintbury, crossing the Kennet & Avon Canal, the roads are quiet. We wind through a few miles of narrow, leafy roads before arriving at our abode for the night, the Crown & Garter. Having stood its ground since 1640, this country pub and hotel is an integral part of Inkpen, with oodles of charm.

Naturally, the Crown & Garter has had to adapt in recent times. Our check-in is contact-free and seamless. The ten rooms – all individually decorated – are in a separate building from the pub proper, surrounding a beautifully planted courtyard and we've already been provided our room number, so it's just a matter of letting ourselves in. The room contains a plus king-sized bed with a high, grey headboard that sits against a feature wall of slate-coloured wood panelling. Sky-blue bedside lamps add a splash of colour, along with cushions on the bed.



"Nice bathroom," calls Elio from the hallway. I poke my head out to confirm his statement and see a generously proportioned room with a walk-in monsoon shower, tiles that emulate the panelling in the bedroom and a large square basin on a wooden stand. The amenities are all in recycled packaging, too. There's much to like about this place already.

We have some daylight left, so we lace up our walking shoes and amble down the road to Inkpen Common. This was once part of the old Inkpen Great Common, where villagers had rights to graze livestock and collect firewood and gorse for feeding their ovens. It's not what we're expecting – an expanse of grassland – it's more than that, a remnant of ancient heathland.

The flower-filled wilderness is fringed with woodland that rings with birdsong. The nature reserve is split into two parts: the smaller south-western portion is now a small woodland of naturally regenerated oak and birch, while the larger eastern part includes areas of heather and gorse, fringed by silver birch and oak. We see a woman collecting wild blackberries and, taking her cue, pop a



few of the sweet berries into our mouths as we wander, navigating by whim. The forested trails are lit by dappled sunlight, but it is the pink heather – lousewort – that lends beauty to the open areas. A variety of heathland plants can be seen here, including gorse, dwarf gorse, and along with the lousewort, two other kinds of heather: the scarce pale dog-violet, and heath milkwort. The Inkpen Wild Walk is a 17-kilometre stroll that starts in Kintbury and takes in Inkpen Common and Inkpen Crocus Field nature reserves. I vow to return to complete this walk.

After a quick refresh, we tread the wooden floorboards in the pub, following the one-way system. We take seats in a corner of the bar for a pre-dinner aperitif while we peruse the menu and our surrounds. We're near a large fireplace, although there's no fire required this evening, and I admire a feature wall of portrait wallpaper. The dining area houses more feature wallpaper, with a wall of books. Industrial-style pendant lights hang over several of the tables, casting a golden light, while the others are lit by downlights.





Within the menu, there's a focus on local produce and the bread is almost home-baked: it comes from the Honesty Bakery, which started in the old barn here, but quickly outgrew the premises and now operates from Newbury. The barn still operates as a coffee shop. Of course, we have to give it a taste test, so we start by sharing an unusual dish of chicken and black pudding terrine with Honesty bread and piccalilli. It's delicious, a harbinger of the flavours to follow, as we feast on soused mackerel with beetroot chutney and horseradish cream, roast rump of lamb with marinated Romero peppers, aubergine puree and hung yoghurt, and pan-fried fillet of hake with golden beetroot, radish and watercress salad.

To finish, a decadent damson and chocolate fondant and a serving of peach crumble. Elio has never liked peach,

but this is so good that we clash spoons in a bid for the last few crumbs.

Tomorrow, we'll explore Kintbury, perhaps arranging passage on the horse-drawn barge that meanders down the canal. Newbury and Hungerford are both close by, as is Highclere Castle, the home of *Downton Abbey*. Avebury stone circle, the largest stone circle in Britain, is also a short drive away.

There's more to explore around here than time permits. If, as Mr Carson from *Downton Abbey* says, "The business of life is the acquisition of memories," we'll need to return to top up our equity.



Hake with tarragon sauce



Soused mackerel



Lamb rump with hung yoghurt



Chicken and black pudding terrine

Prices for a single-night stay at the Crown & Garter start from £105 per room, including breakfast for single occupancy. Prices for two people sharing are from £130 per room, including breakfast. www.crownandgarter.co.uk