

COUNTRY CALM

Down Hall Country House Hotel in Essex represents escapism at its best. Giselle Whiteaker samples country living.



The magnificent Down Hall

With the subtle crunch of gravel, my friend Bronwen and I pull up to Down Hall Hotel in Hatfield Heath, near Bishop's Stortford on the Hertfordshire and Essex border. The exterior of the 1322 Italianate mansion is simply beautiful, the blue sky above bringing a golden glow to the ornate frontage.

The interior is equally as impressive, warm and homely, yet grand at the same time. The atrium lounge on the second floor outside our bedroom door is bathed in light, creating a

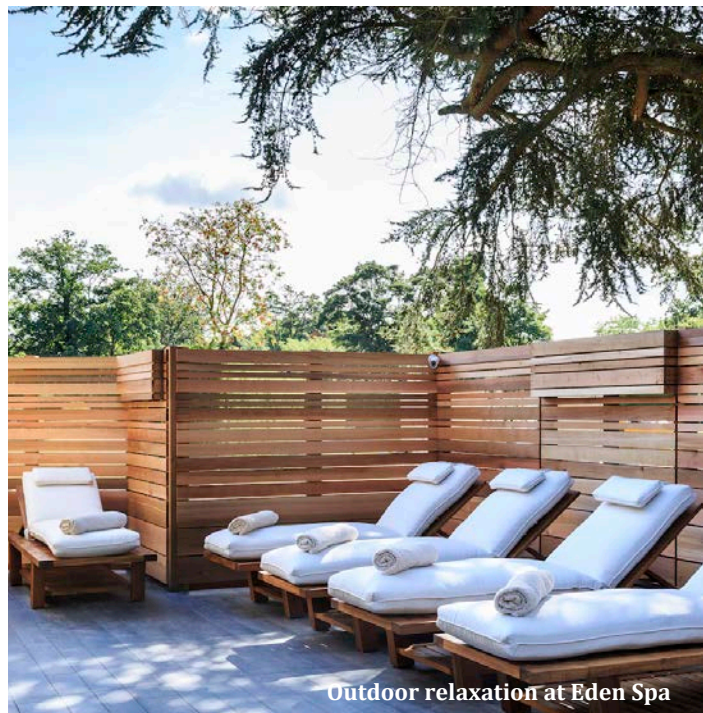
welcoming quiet space. Inside the classically elegant room, the large picture windows look over a fountain on the rear lawn. The 110-acre estate features manicured gardens, with plenty of space for croquet or a game of Giant Chess. Alternatively, there is a choice of rambles, with short, medium and long routes meandering through the forest.

We choose a more sedate pursuit for the afternoon, making our way to the new, luxury Eden Spa. Rinsing off in the mood shower,

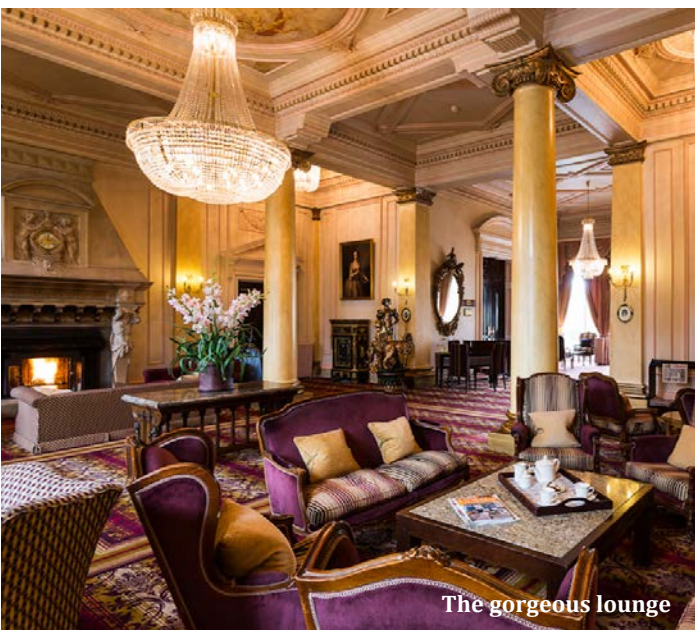
we step into the circular spa, triggering the jets that send streams of airy bubbles to gently pummel our limbs into submission. The sauna and steam room prepare us for the treatment to come – we've both booked in for an age defying facial, promising to "...help minimise lines and wrinkles around the eyes, neck, lips and jawline to help combat the signs of ageing."

"That might be the best facial I've ever had," Bronwen says an hour or so later, as we lie

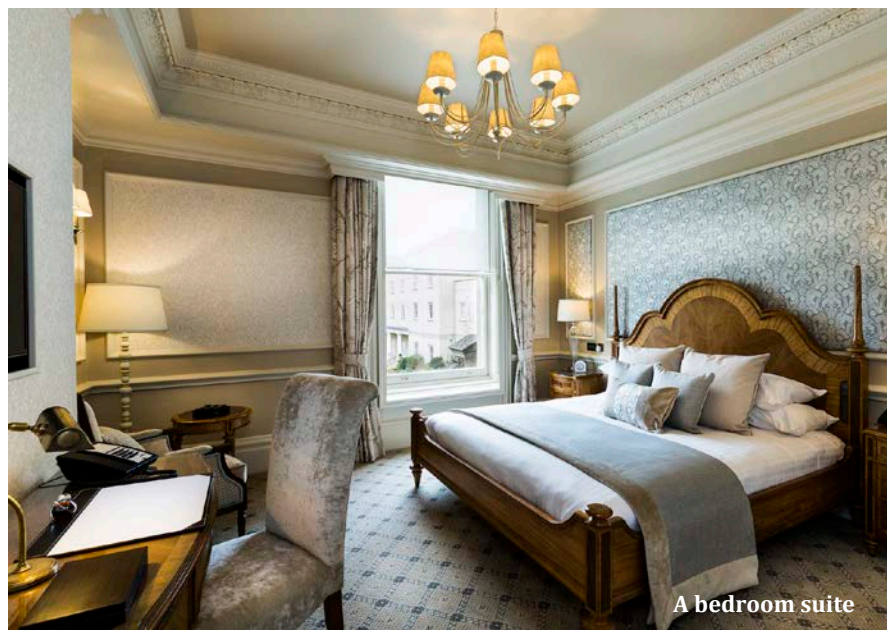
Goats' cheese mousse with Jerusalem artichoke, macadamia, and king oyster mushroom



Outdoor relaxation at Eden Spa



The gorgeous lounge



A bedroom suite

limp and glowing in the relaxation room, languidly sipping on coffee to perk us up for dinner in The Grill Room restaurant. I have to agree. Throughout the treatment, a plethora of light scents swirled in the room, the lighting set low as the therapist smoothed away the tension of the week. A refreshing facial spritz signalled the end of the treatment; a gentle way to be brought back to Earth.

Patrons are filing into the Grill Room restaurant, another light-filled space, when we make our way to dinner. It's clearly a popular spot, serving modern English cuisine, prepared with fresh ingredients from the Down Hall vegetable garden. We nibble on slices of crusty bread, the butter served on a Himalayan salt block, as we peruse the menu, deciding on the mackerel and goats' cheese starters.

Both dishes are visually arresting. The Cornish mackerel is dished with three whorls of wasabi yoghurt, topped with brilliant red strawberries and baby beetroot. It's a mouth-watering combination of the delicate flavour of the ocean with slight wasabi warmth, the acidity of the strawberries lending a piquant edge. The goats' cheese mousse, paired with Jerusalem artichoke, macadamia, and slices of king oyster mushroom, looks like spring on a plate,

delicate pink flowers adding a splash of pastel colouring. It's almost too pretty to eat, but after the first sampling, we know we'll be returning the plate clean.

Bronwen has her heart set on dessert, so she settles on a second starter for her main. The ham hock terrine is served with quince puree, quail egg and a sourdough shard. "This is perfect," she sighs. I'm unable to resist the slow-cooked pork belly, served with mash, summer cabbage, carrot puree and crackling, a slender, sweet heritage carrot resting on top. It's with a satisfied smile that I rest my cutlery. Dessert has a lot to live up to.

The cheese board is a delight, combining a selection of English and French cheeses with biscuits, grapes, homemade chutney and quince jelly, but the toasted almond and buttermilk panna cotta, with chunks of rhubarb from the garden is the showstopper, a superb finale.

After breakfast the next morning, we prepare to get lost in the countryside. Setting off without a map, we aim for the village of Matching, surprising ourselves by finding The Church of St Mary the Virgin, a Grade II-listed Norman church with a 15th-century tower and 13th-century doorway. The sweet, square structure features a low-tiled spire and weather clock, removed from the old church at Epping when the church was pulled down

and set up in Matching in memory of Henry Selwin-Ibbetson, 1st Baron Rookwood of Down Hall.

Seeking directions from some locals working nearby, we follow a trail into Matching Green, a few miles away. Here we find the The Chequers, a stylish country pub and restaurant overlooking the village green, which at 4.9 hectares is one of the largest surviving village greens in Essex. Sitting at an outdoor table, the sun shining, all we are missing is a cricket match to complete the scene.

Walking back to Down Hall hotel, we are struck by the peace of the countryside. There's plenty to do in the area - Mountfitchet Castle, a unique open-air museum demonstrating life in a medieval Motte and Bailey castle is around 10 miles away; the House on the Hill Toy Museum is nearby, with more than 70,000 individual toys on display; Audley End House sits a little further down the road, the Jacobean mansion house featuring a Victorian Service Wing and tranquil gardens created by 'Capability' Brown; and the historic market town of Bishop's Stortford is only a 15-minute drive from Down Hall. Sometimes, though, joy is to be found in doing very little; in taking a stroll, curling up with a good book, or chatting over a sumptuous afternoon tea. And Down Hall hotel is just the place.

For more information about Down Hall Country House Hotel see downhall.co.uk

