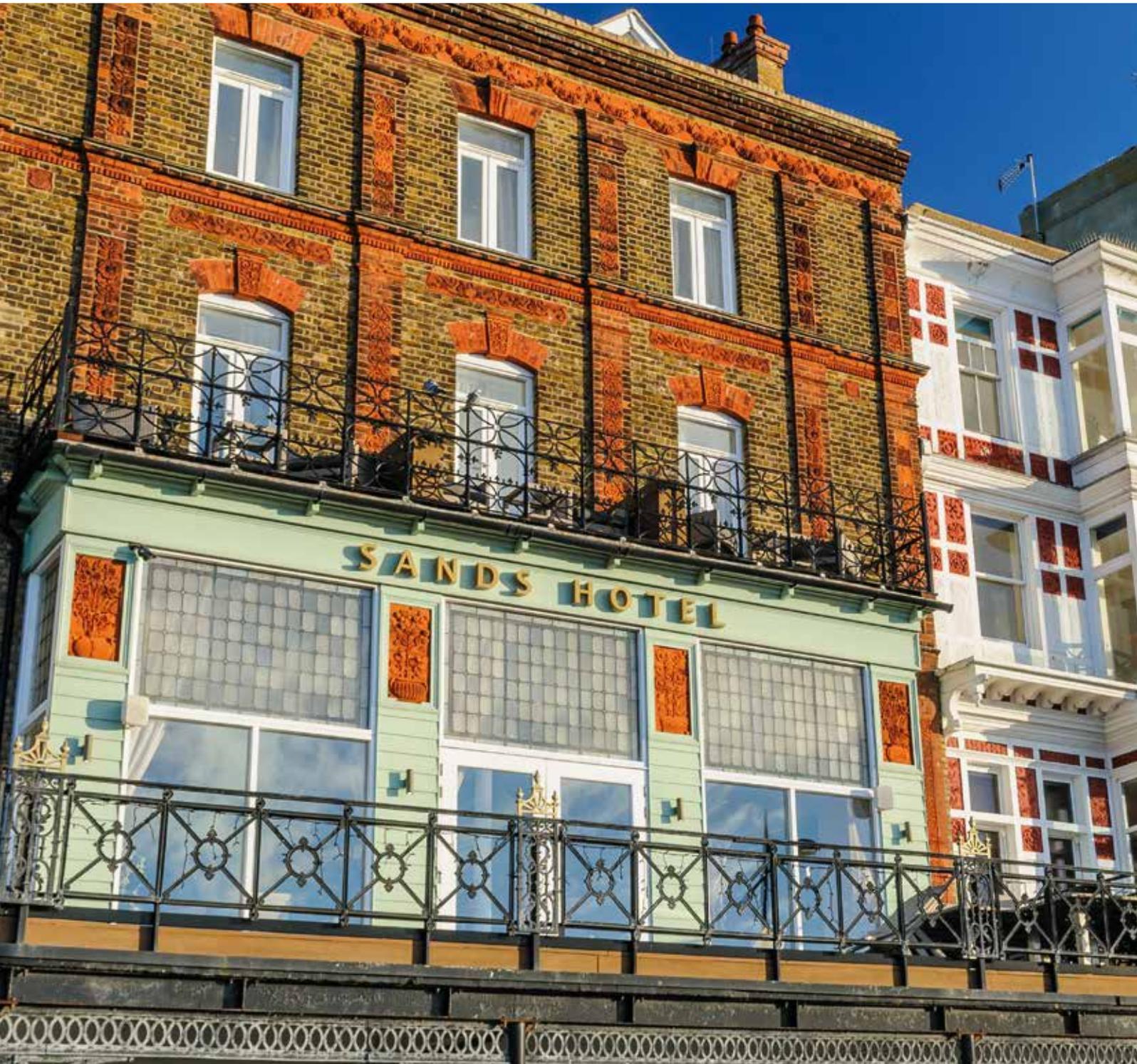


DINING BY THE SEASIDE

MARGATE, IN KENT, HAS SEEN SOMEWHAT OF A REVIVAL, AS HAS SANDS HOTEL. GISELLE WHITEAKER DINES AT THE BAY RESTAURANT.





There's a pianist in the corner, playing mellow tunes to dine by as my friend Andy and I enter the Bay Restaurant at Sands Hotel in Margate. So far, we've been pleasantly surprised by the formerly derelict Victorian building, now a boutique beachfront hotel a short distance along the road from the Turner Contemporary art gallery, comprising 20 rooms. Entrepreneur Nick Conington's vision of understated glamour is reflected in our upper-floor room, decked out in a neutral colour palette of cream, fawn and black that blends contemporary style and period details. The highlight is a small balcony, which, like the restaurant, faces the sea.

The restaurant is light and airy, inviting the seaside in through tall windows that open to the extensive west-facing terrace with the option of al fresco dining in the warmer months. Here the neutral colours are accented with pale turquoise, another reminder of the ocean lapping the shore a few steps away.

Chef Ryan Tasker follows a local and seasonal ethos in the two AA-Rosette restaurant, offering a tantalising array of favours. After perusing the menu and selecting a wine, Andy and I agree to share and negotiate our courses, finally deciding on the boudin of quail and black truffle and the rather intriguing celeriac panna cotta.

The creamy oblong of panna cotta is served on black slate with cubes of smoked apple puree gel and candied hazelnuts. On its own, the panna cotta exudes a delicate flavour, but consumed with the puree, it zings, bursting on the tongue in waves of piquancy. The quail, however, doesn't look like quail. "I've brought you the wrong dish," the waitress quickly confesses. "This is the tempura oysters. I'm so sorry. Please keep this dish and I'll bring the quail right out."

True to her word, she delivers the dish a few moments later, while we savour the last of the crunchy lotus root crisps and the taste of the sea embodied in the oysters, dipped in the accompanying chili sesame dressing, which gives more than a passing nod to Southeast Asian inspiration. Now the quail looks like quail, with five round discs sitting on a bed of confit shallots, next to three poached quail eggs. The plate is drizzled with Jerez vinegar jus and an enticing aroma is drifting upwards, assailing our nostrils and drawing us in. The first egg sends a burst of vibrant yellow across the plate as I sink my knife into the tender white, and I swipe a slice of quail loaded with the shallots through the yolk, the sweet morsel melting in my mouth.

When we eye the generous portion of Gressingham duck breast on a bed of red cabbage, sandwiched between squares of potato gratin and framed by rows of Brussels sprouts with chestnuts and smoked bacon, a bread sauce and spiced honey jus, we know we'll be loosening our belts by the end of the meal. This is hearty winter fare, designed to warm the soul. The Kentish venison loin with roasted beetroot, salsify, pomme puree and port jus is equally abundant – and eminently satisfying.

"Are we really going to have dessert?" I ask Andy and he nods reluctantly, saying "How about we settle on just one?" Compromise reached, we order the dark chocolate fondant

Top: Boudin of quail and black truffle.
Left: The facade of Sands Hotel.



Top right: Boudin of quail and black truffle.
Left: The facade of Sands Hotel.



Celeriac panna cotta.



Tempura oysters with lotus root crisps.



Gressingham duck breast.



Kentish venison loin.

with orange gel, aero chocolate, and milk ice-cream. "That was delicious," says Andy, as his spoon tinkles onto the now bare plate. "I'm glad we shared though – I couldn't have fitted in a whole one." I have to agree.

Muffling yawns of gratification, we return to our room to settle in for the night. We're planning an early start to catch the sun painting the harbour arm like a J.M.W. Turner watercolour from our balcony before breakfast. We want to make the most of our day in Margate, to roam the eclectic old town, packed with offbeat art galleries, vintage shops and microbreweries and drop in to the Turner Contemporary Gallery, credited with spurring the revival of this seaside town. Should our appetites return, we'll make our way back to Sands Hotel, just in time for dinner. ■



INFO
 The airy and contemporary Bay Restaurant and Bar at Sands Hotel, with its relaxing atmosphere and expansive sea views, offers delicious locally sourced produce and is open daily for breakfast, morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea and evening meals. See www.sandshotelmargate.co.uk.

Top right: The terrace of the Bay Restaurant.
 Right: A comfortable room at Sands Hotel.

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THE SANDS' DARK CHOCOLATE FONDANT

INGREDIENTS

- 10g dark chocolate
- 100g unsalted butter
- 170g whole egg + 76g yoke whisked together
- 80g icing sugar
- 12g cocoa powder
- 50g T45 flour (white wheat flour)
- 3g baking powder

METHOD

Melt the chocolate and butter slowly, being careful not to bring it to the boil. Mix in the eggs slowly and gently. When incorporated, sieve in the dry ingredients and mix until smooth.

Pour into ramekins and put into the oven, pre-heated to 180 degrees for 10 minutes.

Serve with ice cream and dot the plate with confit to decorate.

