

ESCAPE TO THE HILLS



THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR COMPREHENSIVE LEISURE DESTINATIONS, WHERE AN ARRAY OF ACTIVITIES IS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS. GISELLE WHITEAKER SAMPLES COUNTRY-CLUB LIVING AT FOXHILLS CLUB & RESORT IN SURREY.



Top: The lush golf course at Foxhills.
Above: The 19th-century Manor House.



Foxhills is larger than it feels.



The Manor House was the project of architect Basevi, cousin to Disraeli.

The snarl of inner-city traffic seems but a distant memory when my boyfriend Elio and I reach the winding driveway of Foxhills Club & Resort on the outskirts of Ottershaw in Surrey. Foxhills has been a top country club in this area for 40 years and judging by the number of cars in the parking lot, its popularity is not on the wane.

The 19th-century Manor House is the heart of the club and resort. The current Manor House was the project of architect Basevi, cousin to Disraeli, whose work included Ely Cathedral in Cambridge. A prodigy of Sir John Soane, Basevi designed the Manor to reflect the spirit of the new Victorian age in its restrained charm and elegance. Used as a convalescent home for wounded officers during the Great War and handed over to the Dig for Victory campaign in the Second World War, the property fell into decline in later years, until being turned into a golf club in 1975, owned by Aer Lingus. The Hayton family, who run the club and resort today, have been in situ since 1983, turning Foxhills into a superb, family-friendly leisure destination within a 400-acre estate.

The rooms are not within the Manor House but, rather, tucked away behind the main building and scattered across several buildings gathered around the swimming pools, tennis courts, and the old stables. Our room is generously proportioned, stylishly decked out in woodland colours – taupe, grey and olive. We sink onto the plush sofa at the end of the bed with a sigh. This will do nicely.

After a filling breakfast the next morning, we take a stroll around the grounds before dropping into the Pro Shop. Foxhills offers three quality golf courses, combining parkland and heathland and it's a glorious day. Neither of us are what you call golfers – I can count the number of times I've played on the fingers of one hand – but the nine holes of the par-three Manor course sound manageable. We'll leave the two Championship courses – Longcross (in *Golf World's* top 100 courses in England) and Bernard Hunt (home to the Senior PGA Professional Championship) – to the professionals.

Kitted out with clubs, we find our tee-off point to the rear of the Manor House, lush lengths of green leading into the distance. Gazing down the fairway, trying to remember the correct grip, I notice an abundance of bunkers, several water

traps, and a few patches of trees in the distance. We make acquaintance with all of them throughout the round. Although we won't be graduating to the Championship courses any time soon, we feel we have earned some time at the spa as a reward for our efforts.

The pool stretches along a wall of windows that open onto the spa garden, featuring one of England's first natural swimming pools, the chemical-free water purified by plants and minerals. The outdoor hot tub tucked away at one end of the garden provides a delightful contrast to the frigid wintry air and, inside, a steam room, two Finnish saunas, and a hydro pool with massage jets give us plenty of opportunities for relaxation. As if that's not enough, in a moment of indulgence, I've booked a spa treatment.

"Would you like a massage, a facial, or perhaps both?" asks my therapist as she gently cleanses my feet. It feels like a trick question, but this is the signature Bespoke Treatment, where I dictate what happens. Greedily, I choose a combined treatment, with a massage focusing on my back and shoulders paired with a facial. A full hour later, I am subtly drawn out of my blissful trance and guided to the relaxation room to complete the transition from languid to awake.

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The outdoor hot tub.

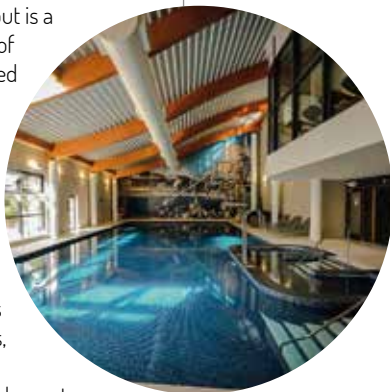


A view of the Manor House from the par-three golf course.

Dinner in the Manor Restaurant is another excuse to indulge, and we do. The six-course tasting menu is the perfect choice for the foodie couple who dislikes making menu decisions, removing the fear of a bad food choice. Not that there would be a bad choice here. Every dish is superb, seamlessly fusing flavours and leading the palate on a journey of discovery.

It's hard to choose a favourite dish. From the divine cauliflower espuma amuse bouche to the chocolate and peanut terrine with yuzu ice cream, crystallized peanuts, and chocolate soil, every morsel is a taste-bud pleaser. For spectacular presentation, however, the halibut is a winner. The delicately seared fillet sits on a bed of sea vegetables; the light tarragon sauce contained within a perfect orb of deep green puree, presented on a charcoal grey plate. It could be a painting.

It's with a certain sense of reluctance that we pack our bags the next morning. Staying longer would be so easy and there's plenty more to explore, with three restaurants, 11 tennis courts, four squash courts, four swimming pools, the spa, a bridge club, and a weekly cycling club, capitalising on the country club's status as official resort partner to the Aviva Tour of Britain and home to Team GB's road race cycling team during the London 2012 Olympic Games. Foxhills' aim is to ensure guests leave feeling better than when they arrived. In this, they succeed. ■



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Seared halibut, sea vegetables and tarragon sauce.



Beef fillet with mushroom, watercress and pommes Anna.

The indoor pool stretches along a wall of windows.

INFO

To book your stay at Foxhills Club & Resort, call 01932 872 050. www.foxhills.co.uk