

# Finding Romance in Reading

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Reading might not be a natural go-to destination when planning a romantic weekend break, but the Roseate Reading may just make you change your mind. Giselle Whiteaker checks in.



The Roseate Reading

Queen Victoria once visited Reading and received such a poor reception that she turned her back on the town. This is represented literally with a statue of Her Majesty near the town hall, where she faces away from the town centre. Or so the rumour goes. That story, and a story it is, is my overriding memory of the university town, 20 minutes west of London in Berkshire and one of the largest settlements in the UK without city status.

In fact, Queen Victoria never visited Reading and her views on the conurbation are unknown. Sculptor George Blackall Simonds was commissioned to create the statue, which

was erected in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. It is positioned to look north along Blagrove Street towards the railway. Queen Victoria would have originally been visible from passing trains and greeted rail visitors walking to the centre of town head on.

Unlike the urban myth, I'm determined to base my opinion of Reading on thorough exploration. I'm not even going to let dreary weather get in my way. This is how my boyfriend Elio and I end up standing in front of what the Evening Standard once described as the 'UK's Sexiest Townhouse Hotel', the Roseate Reading.



The Roseate is centrally located, a mere five-minute walk from Reading railway station, next to the impressive Baroque Revival-style crown court. Once the Shire Hall for the Berkshire County Council, the main Grade II-Listed building dates back to 1911. The early Edwardian red-brick building is inviting, particularly on a day where the wind has bite. We ascend the red carpet covering the short flight of stairs to the front door, promptly opened by an alert doorman, and enter the rather grand lobby area.

Elements of the building's former life can be seen: the original wooden panelling, cornice mouldings, marble floor and fireplaces remain. The latter is visible in the lounge space facing reception, which houses sofas upholstered in rich fabrics and a striking piece of textural art by Simon Allen. It's a sculptural wall relief, inspired in part by the landscape and light of Cornwall. The abstract silver form shines like water, reflecting light from all directions.

Art is a bit of a focus here, in both the public spaces and the rooms. Around the corner from the elevator, there is a beautiful figure of a woman, life-sized, arms raised towards a bird in flight. It's by Essex-born artist Claire Norrington. There are paintings by Paul Ambille, President of The French Artists Society; Impressionist landscapes by Isabelle de Ganay, Master of The School of Rouen; and nudes by Alain Bonnefoit, described by Herve Bazin as the 'Painter of Venus'. In our suite, a bronze horse crafted by Claire Norrington trots across the table. Perhaps most visually arresting, though, is the Italian chandelier comprised of 86,000 beads, which runs the full height of the staircase – from the third floor down to ground – like a crystal waterfall.

At only 55 rooms, the Roseate Reading is boutique, in the best sense of the word. The rooms in the original building have a lavish, opulent feel, while those in the House building at the rear are more minimalistic. We are in one of the Roseate Executive Suites, which is suitably expansive, with room for a writing desk, coffee table, sofa and chairs – with light pink, deep purple and chocolate upholstery – and a four-person dining table. Behind a mirrored door is the coffee machine, kettle and mini bar. The bathroom houses a deep bathtub and monsoon shower. It's all deep colours and plush textiles and textures that meld into comfort.

Rather than returning to the cold, we book the sauna and steam room in the small Aheli Spa. We skip across the parking at the rear cocooned in thick hotel robes and catch the elevator to the ninth floor of the House, where we are provided with a bottle of water and towels and led to the sauna area. Now we understand why sessions here are private – the sauna and steam room opposite are compact – perfect for two.

Later in the evening, we take a seat at the restaurant, housed in a temporary space while The Reading Room



The courtyard outside the new Reading Room Restaurant



The lounge space houses sofas upholstered in rich fabrics and a striking piece of textural art by Simon Allen



The Roseate Executive Suite is suitably expansive, with light pink, deep purple and chocolate upholstery





Orange and lemon cured salmon with caviar, charred cucumber, baby fennel and avocado emulsion



Butternut squash espuma with curried banana, pumpkin seed granola and truffle oil



Dark chocolate and miso tart with banana, sesame and coriander

Restaurant is prepared for its imminent launch. We feast on a tasting menu that features exquisite flavours such as orange and lemon cured salmon with caviar, charred cucumber, baby fennel and avocado emulsion. The pigeon breast is a revelation, the strong game meat lightened with pickled pear, hazelnuts, sweetcorn and nasturtium Parma ham. We indulge in Himalayan salt-dried sirloin of beef and cod loin before reaching the sweet side, where we are greeted with pre-dessert, parfait, and then dessert. The dark chocolate and miso tart with banana, sesame and coriander sets the bar on desserts for Elio, who pronounces it an adults-only dessert, decadent, salty and sweet simultaneously. If this meal is anything to go by, The Reading Room will be a smash hit.

In the morning, fortified by a hearty winter breakfast, we take a walk in Forbury Gardens, just outside Roseate Reading's front door. This public park was originally the outer court of Reading Abbey, used for gun emplacements in the English Civil War and for military drills during the Napoleonic Wars after dissolution of the abbey in the 16th century. Now, it's a pleasant place to stroll, anchored by a central monument, the Maiwand Lion. This enormous artwork commemorates the dead from the 66th Berkshire Regiment at the Battle of Maiwand in Afghanistan in 1880

and is another work by George Blackall Simonds created prior to his immortalisation of Queen Victoria.

Through an archway on the edge of Forbury Gardens, we spy some ruins, not far from the site of the now-closed Reading Prison, a Grade II-Listed building famous for being home to Oscar Wilde in the late 19th century. The ruins are of Reading Abbey, which was founded by Henry I in 1121 and dissolved by Henry VIII in 1538. What initially looks like a couple of heavily damaged walls turns out to be an extensive site, consisting of the south transept, the treasury, the chapter house, the dormitory and the refectory, some more intact than others. There's history around every corner here: Henry I was buried in front of the altar of the then incomplete abbey; the last abbot of Reading Abbey was convicted of high treason and, somewhat gruesomely, hanged, drawn and quartered in front of the Abbey Church; the Gothic abbey gateway on Abbey Square once housed a school attended by Jane Austen.

If Queen Victoria had stayed at the Roseate Reading, her rumoured opinion of the city may well be different. As it should be. The Roseate brings the romance back to Reading.



The transept of Reading Abbey



The chapter house is the most complete room within the Reading abbey ruins



The atmospheric abbey ruins

The Roseate Reading is excited to announce the opening of its new all-day dining restaurant in March. In line with the literary theme throughout the hotel, The Reading Room will offer modern European cuisine and an innovative cocktail menu in a beautifully designed setting. For more information about the The Reading Room and the Roseate Reading, see [www.roseatehotels.com](http://www.roseatehotels.com)