

IN THE HEART OF SURREY

VISIT GUILDFORD AND YOU'LL FIND A VIBRANT MARKET TOWN WITH FIRST CLASS SHOPPING, RESTAURANTS AND ATTRACTIONS, AS GISELLE WHITEAKER DISCOVERS.



Entering the Guildford Harbour Hotel, escaping a drizzly, grey afternoon, my friend Alex and I are immediately struck by the light, airy feel of the lobby. An immense bookshelf dotted with curious stretches to the double-height ceiling and brightly coloured chairs are dotted with patrons drinking aperitifs from the open bar, behind which sits the Harbour Café, Bar and Grill, offering dishes ranging from chargrilled squid to smoked venison Carpaccio and Tamworth belly ribs. The restaurant opens to an extensive terrace that on a fine night would be an enticing prospect. Tonight we'll be dining inside.

After a solid night's sleep in our comfortable room, decked out in dramatic black and silver with opulent red and gold highlights, and a hearty breakfast back at the Harbour Café, we set off to explore the thriving commercial town and commuter hub. In 2013, a survey by Experian extolled Guildford as the luxury shopping capital of the UK. Wandering down the cobbled high street, lined with an array of designer and boutique shops, alongside a number of historic buildings including the Tudor Guildhall with its spectacular overhanging clock, it's easy to understand why. I didn't come to the large town in Surrey with shopping in mind, but I find myself toting several bags of must-haves as we stroll onwards to Guildford Castle.

The medieval castle, thought to have been built shortly after the 1066 invasion of England by William the Conqueror, was used by the King of England in the 1400s and due to this, Guildford is the only royal town in Surrey. Today, the great tower stands as a centrepiece, the top affording a panoramic

The medieval castle, thought to have been built shortly after the 1066 invasion of England by William the Conqueror, was used by the King of England in the 1400s and due to this, Guildford is the only royal town in Surrey.



Top: Guildford Castle tower.
Above: The lobby lounge of the Guildford Harbour Hotel.



view of Guildford and the beautiful surrounding countryside. The structure is surrounded by immaculately kept gardens, the pristine flower beds bursting with colour, despite the wintry chill in the air.

At the rear of the castle gardens we find a touching memorial to Lewis Carroll, who spent time nearby in The Chestnuts, his sisters' house, where he died in 1898. The modern, life-size statue sculpted by Jeanne Argent shows Alice making her way through the looking-glass, her right arm raised towards the castle tower. It's a beautiful spot for a moment of contemplation.

When our stomachs begin to rumble, we head back to Guildford Harbour Hotel, to the hotel's signature Jetty Restaurant. The multi award-winning Jetty Restaurant concept follows on from the success of The Jetty restaurants in Christchurch, Dorset and Salcombe, Devon. The restaurant follows a contemporary maritime theme and we eagerly slide into a mustard-coloured booth, overlooked by two antique brass diving helmets, to peruse the menu.

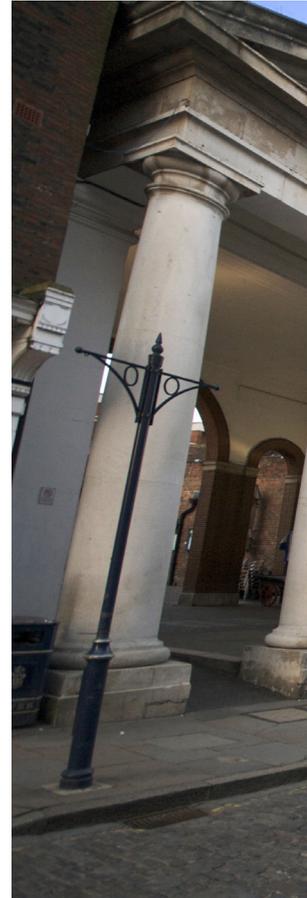
We start with the Jetty bites, a selection of seafood nibbles including salmon cannelloni and a miniature pot of the most tender marinated octopus, which ties in well with a shared portion of Jetty crab croquettes and a creamy risotto of wild mushrooms, topped with a poached hen's egg with a Madeira and truffle sauce, dished in a glass Kilner-style jar. Alex is impressed with the rich flavour of his quail pie, bound with chicken and mushrooms, while I indulge in a generous platter of hot 'Fruits de Mer', with mussels, scallops, prawns and more. We top off our late lunch with a light-as-air blackberry mousse with apple sorbet and almond crumbs, vowing not to eat again until tomorrow.

Bellies full, as the rain sets in again, we slip into the warmth of the Harbour Spa to while away the last of the afternoon in the steam room, sauna, bubbling Jacuzzi and small swimming pool with two swim jets to allow for the equivalent of laps. The rumour is that there are plans for an outdoor pool on the terrace, which gives us yet another reason to come back.

By the time we emerge, glowing from several hours of sheer relaxation, we have reenergised, and we slip out of the lobby and into the Long Bar, connected to The Jetty. As the name suggests, taking centre stage is a spectacular sweeping 120-foot marble top bar, lined with plush stools and surrounded by relaxed, stylish furnishings. The bar is buzzing – it's clearly fast become a popular night spot – and the expert mixologists are whipping up a variety of indulgent cocktails. It's a fitting place to end the night.



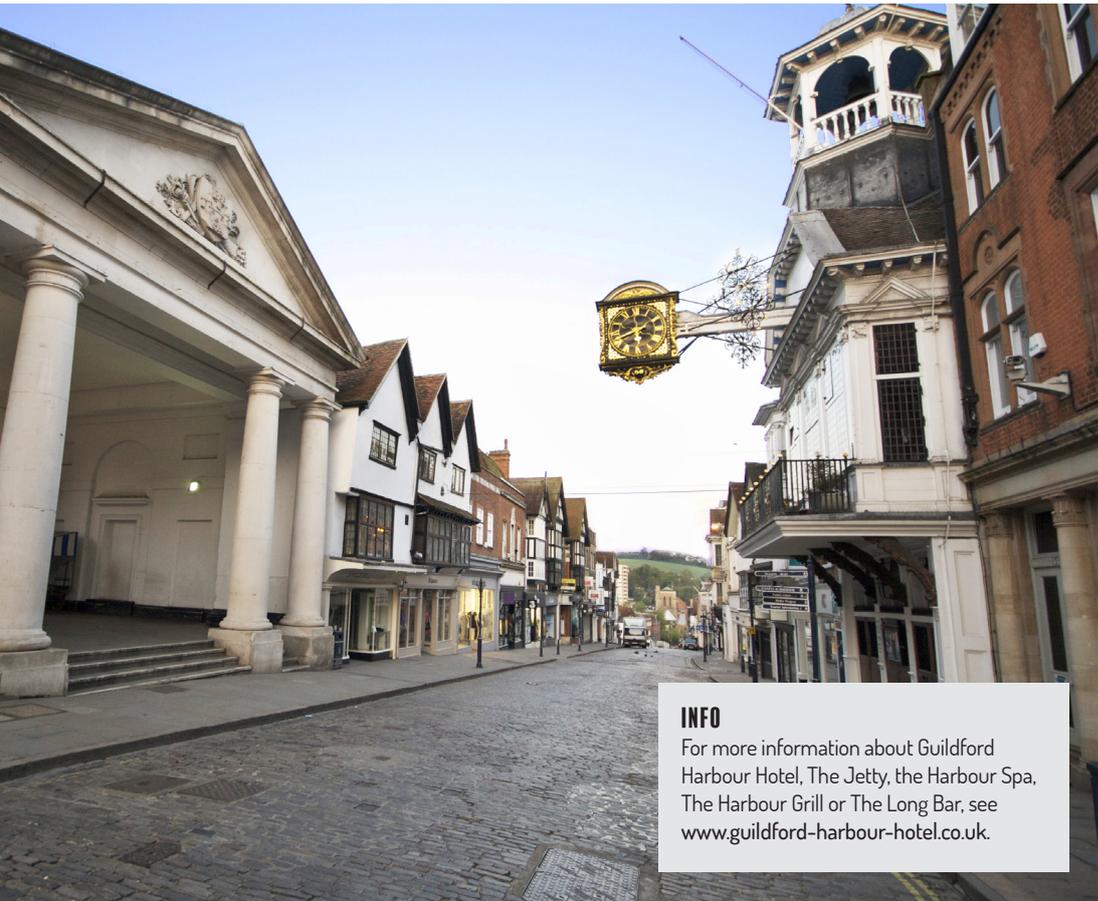
Guildford is a pleasant surprise. Although less than 30 miles from Central London, it has retained much of its individuality. The surrounding area is dotted with historic properties, such as Loseley House and Clandon Park, and the RHS Wisley gardens are a mere 15-minute drive away. There are many walks in the area including the North Downs Way, running from Farnham to Folkstone some 80 miles away, or visitors can follow the River Wey to Godalming or Woking. Over a farewell breakfast at The Harbour Grill, we look at the weather forecast for the day ahead. "There's always the spa," says Alex. ■



Clockwise from top left: The tudor Guildhall; The Scholar of Surrey; Guildford High Street; the bar at Jetty Restaurant; comfortable dining booths at The Jetty; the Harbour Spa.

Bellies full, as the rain sets in again, we slip into the warmth of the Harbour Spa to while away the last of the afternoon in the steam room, sauna, bubbling Jacuzzi and small swimming pool with two swim jets to allow for the equivalent of laps.





INFO
 For more information about Guildford Harbour Hotel, The Jetty, the Harbour Spa, The Harbour Grill or The Long Bar, see www.guildford-harbour-hotel.co.uk.



Jetty crab croquettes.



Beef brisket hash with duck egg at the Harbour Cafe, Bar and Grill.

As the name suggests, taking centre stage is a spectacular sweeping 120-foot marble top bar, lined with plush stools and surrounded by relaxed, stylish furnishings.



Fruits de Mer at The Jetty.



Quail Pie at The Jetty.