



Mini-breaks: Stoke Place

By Alexander Larman

First impressions

The beautiful surroundings of Stoke Place – a William and Mary mansion with sweeping Capability Brown-designed gardens – are a sight for sore eyes, and particularly impressive given that it's a hop and a skip from Slough, itself hardly a place associated with beauty. The reception, like the rest of the building, is a mixture of boutique hotel style and classical sophistication, and the greeting is warm and friendly.

The room

We stayed in the Alexandra suite in the main part of the house. Calling it a 'suite' is slightly grandiose – it's really a large bedroom – but it is beautifully decorated and views over the grounds and the lake are breathtaking. The bed was extremely comfortable, offering a modernist spin on the four-poster, and the bathroom has all the bells and whistles you'd expect. Other rooms vary in size and location, ranging from the bulk of the accommodation in the main house to some situated in the gardens.

The bar

In faintly confusing fashion, the Ilse Crawford-designed Garden Bar was accessed from our room either through a short-cut downstairs, or by going all the way round the hotel. It's a hip and refreshingly informal spot, perfect for a pre-dinner cocktail or just a morning coffee. There's also a particularly comfy semi-hidden snug round the corner, which is just the thing for curling up with your loved one.

The restaurant

The Garden Room Restaurant, under head chef Craig van der Meer, has been attracting plaudits from food critics thanks to its molecular gastronomy-inspired cuisine, which remains light enough not to overwhelm. We chose the five-course tasting menu, which included a delightful *amuse bouche* of gin and tonic sorbet, a daring but spectacular starter of langoustine and chicken wing, a divine main of beef fillet with tongue (in?) cheek and Bordelaise sauce, and a lovely deconstructed chocolate pudding to end. Matching wines were well chosen and generously replenished,

and the whole lot costs about half the price of something inferior in London.

The highlights

Less ostentatious and attention-seeking than many other country house hotels, Stoke Place prides itself on offering a genuine getaway in a stylish yet traditional setting. It succeeds. Some might find the mix of 21st-century décor and 18th-century buildings more challenging, but as far as we were concerned, the mix feels entirely natural and unforced. The staff is friendly, the welcome genuine.

The downside

Some of the outside rooms – the newly completed Garden Rooms in particular – offer a more modern experience that may not appeal to those seeking a country house feel. There isn't a huge amount to do roundabouts, though foodies should note that the Fat Duck and Bray are just down the road.

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stokeplace.co.uk