



Hotel Reviews

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The Olde Bell, Hurley, Berkshire

The lowdown: A mere 40 minutes from London Paddington train station is the tranquil, picturesque village of Hurley in Berkshire. But don't think for a minute it's all pitchforks and hay-chewing locals. As I strolled down the High Street I spied the type of magnificent, stately, country homes I've always fantasised about living in (I've never quite shaken my "Lady of the Manor" aspirations). And in keeping with the old-school grandeur of the village, there's a 5 star hotel, The Olde Bell, which is itself a major historical hotspot – it started life as a coaching inn and parts of it date back to 1135. In more modern times, dignitaries like Churchill and Eisenhower held meetings there, and Elizabeth Taylor was one of the glamorous regulars. Now the hotel is a chic retreat from city life and has been lovingly restored by uber interior designer, Ilse Crawford (of Babington House and Soho House NY fame).

The rooms: Stepping inside the Olde Bell with its original crooked floors and seriously low ceilings (I'm pint-sized myself but people were clearly quite diddy back in the 1100s), I felt like I'd accidentally walked onto the set of some fabulous historical drama. If only I'd remembered my bonnet. But that's the beauty of Ilse's refurbishment – you feel as if you're stepping back in time, but still have all the luxuries you would expect from a hip hotel. My spacious room in the main inn was a chintz-free zone and decorated in the type of luxe, rustic, chic (which I like to call luxe-tic) that I love. Wooden floors, a gi-normous bed with sumptuous pillows and expensive-looking wool blankets tucked in over the top of the thick, but light-as-air duvet. And a massive claw-foot bath in the middle of the room (but if I fancied a power shower, there was huge walk-in one in the bathroom). There was even a wooden rocking chair. I felt so immediately at home that if it hadn't been for my pesky hunger pangs, I'd have cocooned myself in my lovely room and hibernated until summer, dreaming of dandy highwaymen. Sigh.

Dining: Downstairs in the candlelit restaurant we were led to our "booth" – two high-backed settle benches - covered in woolen "Welsh" blankets - placed either side of our oak, trestle-style table. The beautifully cooked seasonal menu (which changes daily) is mainly locally sourced and the bread, biscuits, pastries, jams and chutneys are created fresh on the premises. And it was just as I'd hoped it would be. Simple but substantial; unpretentious but amazing. A tall order, I know, but the award winning kitchen team (Executive Chef Warren Geraghty; Head Chef James Fergusson and Pastry Chef Jason Farr) delivered. My starter (Cock-a-Leekie soup) and main (Lamb Chop with vegetables), were so incredible that even thinking about it now makes me want to jump on a train and go back. Also, from May to September the hotel opens up its summer kitchen which means you can eat outside in the meadow garden (how picture postcard-perfect does that sound?) and feast on hog roasts and summer salads. If you're looking for somewhere to have a party, then at the end of the garden is a large, tented area, which can seat up to 60 people for private soirees. A midsummer night's dream...

Further information: Double rooms start from £139. The Olde Bell, High Street, Hurley (nr. Henley-on-Thames) Berkshire, SL6 5LXT T: 01628 825 881 website: www.theoldebell.co.uk Email: oldebellreception@coachinginn.co.uk