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GQ.com goes to the Chilterns

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By GQ.COM | 26 April 12



Escaping London on a Friday afternoon is always fraught with risk. Leave it any later than 3pm and you're almost certain to hit snarling traffic on one of the main exit routes out of town. A 4pm departure however merely ensures an agonizingly slow two-mile drive through the back streets of west Kensington to get to the A4. Factor in the partial closure of the Hammersmith flyover and only the early spring sunshine and the thought of a weekend away in the Chilterns prevented immediate meltdown.

The beauty of our end destination, however - Hurley, a small village in the Berkshire countryside a short row down the river from Henley on Thames - is that no sooner are you on the M4 than your satnav is politely advising you that your destination is less than 30 minutes away. So much so, in fact, that by 5.15pm we were happily ensconced in the grounds of the Olde Bell Inn, drink in hand, sun on face, the long, hard slog of the working week already a distant memory.

The Olde Bell is a spectacularly good find. An historic coaching inn with 50 bedrooms and a wonderfully atmospheric bar, it boasts an Ilse Crawford-designed interior that mixes old and quirky with sudden flashes of modernity. The room GQ.com stayed in boasted a king-size bed and a cleverly designed separate sitting room - both with wall mounted flatscreen Samsung TVs - a huge walk in wet room and, to cap it off, a freestanding, claw-footed, roll-top bath handily located in the bedroom.

Dinner in the restaurant was preceded by a soul-enhancing drink in the inn's ancient bar. A spit-and-sawdust wooden floor, open fireplace and cosy tables in every nook and cranny makes this a very hard place to leave but the smells drifting through from the restaurant do win out in the end. Salt-baked beets with Irish goat's cheese, grilled English asparagus, saffron-braised British cuttlefish and Blythburg pork belly were all expertly cooked and classic puddings in the guise of treacle tart and port-poached pears topped off a fine gastronomic experience. The presence of a distant acquaintance entertaining a young lady who was clearly not his wife made for some interesting small talk.

A leisurely wake-up provided the perfect backdrop for an outstanding breakfast. With Radio 2's *Sounds Of The Sixties* adding to the ambience, the piping hot Full English was a delight, as was the service - friendly, helpful and always accommodating. Our stay ended with a two-and-a-half-hour walk along the river and back up through the glorious Berkshire countryside. Aptly called Willow Walk, just ask at the front desk and they'll give you a map and point you in the right direction.

That really should have been enough but a second night at the Olde Bell's sister property, the Crown in Amersham, awaited. The similarities between the two properties are obvious the moment you walk into the carefully curated hotel foyer. The feeling is more smart private residence than functional hotel lobby: board games and magazines adorn the central coffee table and the oak staircase leading up to the guest rooms is impressive in its antiquity. Our room was just across the courtyard and Crawford's light touch was in evidence again. This time a giant four-poster bed was offset by a splendidly retro rocking chair. Muted throws and animal print rugs gave the place an eclectic, homely feel.

The bar is more modern in vibe than the Olde Bell and attracts a younger, transient crowd. The dining room is split into two parts and we chose to sit looking out over Amersham's quaint High Street. The wine list is straightforward but there are number of good, reasonably priced wines that fit well with the sort of simple, deconstructed menu that you'd expect of a place called the Chop House. Grilled meat and fish are the order of the day but a small army of accompaniments means that there is plenty to keep the tastebuds interested. Sunday papers, coffee and fresh muffins greeted us on the Sunday morning and a languorous stroll round Amersham's antique shops brought a perfect weekend to a close.

Double rooms from £109 per night. The Olde Bell, High Street, Hurley, Berkshire SL6 5LX.
theoldebell.co.uk

Double rooms from £95 per night. The Crown, 16 High Street, Old Amersham, Buckinghamshire, HP7 0DH.
thecrownamersham.com