

Creature Comforts

Is this the most thoughtfully executed addition to Britain's hospitality scene?

To add a game-changing property to Britain's burgeoning repertoire of rural luxury hotels, you really need to take that "If a thing is worth doing..." adage pretty seriously. The Newt – a working Somerset estate which opened as a country house hotel at the end of the summer following a painstaking renovation – is testimony to what happens when the maxim is approached with borderline-obsessive zeal.

The property was the seat of the Hobhouse family for around 200 years, but the story of what this remarkable place is today begins in 2013, when South African billionaire Koos Bekke and his wife Karen Roos bought the Grade II-listed property, moved in and began cooking up an increasingly ambitious passion project for their new 800-acre slice of England's pastoral south-west.

Six years (and a rumoured £50 million) later, one of the most striking aspects of The Newt, especially from the air, is the apple-tree-dotted walled parabola garden framed by woodlands and orchards. Designed in the form of a maze by French botanical architect Patrice Taravella, its graduating, impressionist's-dream hues have a strong echo of the work of Piet Oudolf at the Hauser & Wirth gallery, five miles away in nearby Bruton.

At its centre, the carefully restored original Gardener's Cottage, under whose thatched roof a family of eleven once slept in a space roughly the size of a small beach hut, acts as a beacon of how radical transformation can be carried out while safeguarding what already exists. Which brings us onto how this establishment, formerly Hadspen House, got its moniker. With Britain's unerringly diligent conservation bodies policing proceedings, 2,000 newts that reside here had to be painstakingly rounded up and shifted around the site repeatedly in order to survive its development. Far from being irked by the procedure, the owners



Clockwise from top: The Newt is photogenic from any angle; the Threshing Barn, used for banquets and Harvest celebrations; lunch at The Garden Café; inside the Stable Room

renamed the property in homage to the inconvenient amphibians.

As for the interiors, Roos – an author and former editor of *Elle Decoration South Africa* – weaved her magic determined, according to our tour guide for the day, "to make each room her favourite". Juxtaposing antiquity with modernity is not a novel ruse in interior design these days, but it's done here with brazen panache – not least in the Croquet Room, where a restored terracotta-and-cream mosaic floor clashes elegantly with multicoloured rubber wickerwork chairs, while a Moroso tropicalia hangs in a corner near the room's focal point, a racing-green wood burner.

Elsewhere, in the library and drawing room, bookcases have been restored and now house the original book collection of the Hobhouse dynasty, whose family portraits mingle with wild boar and horse heads by taxidermy sculptor Frédérique Morrel, as well as mounted high-res zoom-ins of the more traditional artworks.

The rooms – 23 in all – have an unfussy lavishness that makes the zeitgeist outside



of these walls seem a little over-engineered, while the stables have been transformed into generously spaced loft suites. The Clock House, with its four separate rooms, is as tasteful and cosy a base for a group getaway as we've seen in England (after-hours exclusive access to the pool is included). Such groups would do well to make use of Horns & Pigtales – a vaulted cellar, once used for water storage, which has been sculpted and sand-blasted into a function room for smallish parties to take part in wine tastings (expect South African wines from Bekker's Babylonstoren Estate to feature heavily) and banquets, with menus inspired by Georgian documents found during the makeover.

Talking of the cuisine, the prime lunch option is The Garden Café – a low-slung, glass-fronted modern building which, in the early-November soup that characterises our visit, is barely visible until you're 100 metres or so from it. Open the notebook-style menu and you'll see that the increasingly ubiquitous phrase "local seasonal ingredients" is taken deadly

seriously here: the opening page is a full description of the horticultural status quo on the sprawling vegetable patch, visible from your table. ("November: a gloomy month for the garden... autumn cabbages are cut, along with the remaining sprouting broccoli spears..."). If you feel they're taking things too seriously, the "Parsnip (Bashed)" main – featuring Sharpham Park spelt, cave-aged cheddar and sunflower seed pesto – will quickly change your mind.

The main restaurant The Botanical Rooms, accessed via an open kitchen with a round chef's table in a corner enclave, serves up similar site-grown/ foraged/ distilled/brewed/baked fare in two different settings: a bright conservatory for those who relish that quintessentially British oxymoron "covered al fresco", or in The Oak Room if Hogswartian hygge is more your bag; think original oak panelling and fireplace, lit dimly by Tom Dixon fittings.

The spa features a salt room as well as the now-customary steam room and sauna, but it's the indoor pool that offers, for us, the most beatific moment here. Indeed, The Newt is packed with small, unique pleasures: sipping the on-site-made cider while gazing out over the parabola; sauntering into the Croquet Room with a glass of sweet-and-smoky Babylonstoren red and picking out some vinyl from a collection propped up besides a Tellus turntable; in summer, phoning the main building for a G&T from a small call-box next to a badminton court, closed off to its surrounds by an enchanting, amorphous hedge fondly nicknamed "Old Knobbly" by ground staff.

Taking the prize, though, is doing a length of the beautifully lit indoor section of the spa pool, sliding over a three-inch-high barrier into water 20° degrees hotter, passing through a door-less, human-sized catflap into a steaming outdoor oasis flanked by elegant brown-stone buildings to the left, a domed trellis to the right: in front of you is a well-kempt garden, an outdoor log fire burning at its extremity.

This space is set to be turned into a medieval garden, and since our visit, an apiary and Roman villa are also in the planning. This is a work in progress. What better excuse for making bi-annual pilgrimages? – Nick Scott

Rooms start at £425 per night based on two sharing on a B&B basis. thenewtinsomerset.com