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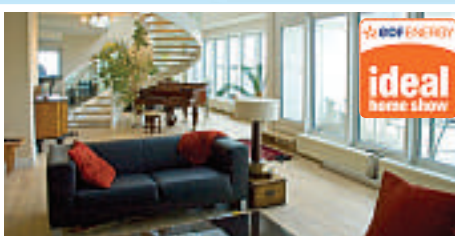


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It's Saturday!

TRAVEL

**Golden
standard
of rural
retreat**

WILTON Court Hotel owners Helen and Roger Wynn have something to celebrate. Their hotel has just been included in the exclusive Visit Wales Gold Award list for hotels that "exceed customer expectation and are first class products in all respects".

Being one of only seven hotels to receive the award is an achievement in itself; what makes it even more special is that the Wilton Court is not actually in Wales at all.

The 500-year-old building nestles on the banks of the River Wye, half a mile from the market town of Ross-on-Wye, and five miles from the border with Wales. All 10 of its ensuite bedrooms overlook either the river or the hotel's gardens, which feature a 300-year-old mulberry tree.

The hotel's public areas display an esoteric mix of fittings, with Indonesian wood carved ducks and Thai leather canisters housed on mediaeval stonework alongside Elizabethan leaded windows. There is a large oriental gong by the entrance to the restaurant — and yes, it does make a satisfying noise when struck. I tried it.

This highly individual, but successful, mix of old and new, East and West, reflects owners Roger and Helen Wynn's experiences in the hotel trade, which stretched from London Park Lane's Dorchester to Hong Kong's Shangri-La.

Their journey led them to the Wilton Court nine years ago. First seen on a bleak winter's day with the river in flood, they have since transformed it into an idyllic retreat that is very conveniently situated for visitors from South Wales.

The hotel was originally a magistrates court. What is now a comfortable wood-paneled bar was once the courtroom. In the cellar beneath the bar a passageway runs beneath the road to the former jail (now a pub) opposite.

While most of the hotel's bedrooms have king or super king beds, ours boasted a four poster. It was warmly decorated with William Morris wallpaper and fabrics. The ensuite bathroom was well-equipped with kimonos and luxury bath products.

The room overlooked the river (with swans) and the Wilton Bridge which leads into Ross a brisk 15 minute walk away. The walk is quite steep in places but you are rewarded with a town that is well-blessed with pubs and bars in which to recover. We

stopped at one where, we learned from a plaque on the wall, the novelist Charles Dickens met his biographer to plan his great American reading tour in 1867.

Refreshed by a pint (me) and the discovery of two unusual lamps in one of Ross's numerous decor shops (my wife), we made our way back through the fading light of a cold and grey January day to a welcoming tea in the hotel's comfortable lounge in front of a log fire carefully tended by Roger.

Small country hotels like this often score well against their larger city brethren with the quality of their food. The best of them use local produce imaginatively to memorable effect.

As the hotel was quiet on the night we stayed, Helen had put us and her other guests in the bar rather than the Mulberry Restaurant. Chef Mike Fowler had prepared a special tasting menu for us to try.

Two starters — carpaccio of beef with pickled chicory, and skate wing with saute potato and caper butter — were followed by loin of Herefordshire venison with parsnip puree and chocolate oil, and wild seabass and crushed potato with crab and herb watercress veloute.

After that we did not think we would manage the two desserts — hot chocolate fondant served with a white chocolate and vodka sorbet, and a



GRAND DESIGN
The four poster bed added to the luxury of the break.

SPENCER FEENEY takes a January break in the idyllic Wilton Court Hotel on the Wales-Shropshire border and finds the owners in buoyant mood.

It's Saturday!

TRAVEL

in association with www.thisistravel.co.uk



RIVER VIEWS The Wilton Court Hotel has stunning views over the River Wye or the hotel's vast grounds on the other side.

champagne and raspberry jelly served with a raspberry sorbet, lemon curd sauce and poppy tuiles. But we did, so delicious was everything.

The meal was superior to many we had eaten in some of Britain's most prestigious restaurants. I am sure the Wynns appreciate what a star they have in their chef.

Having slept well in our four poster, we woke the next day to watch the sun rise over the river and above the wooded hills beyond. Breakfast in the conservatory restaurant was freshly cooked and again featured local produce.

After all that food, we needed some exercise before we headed for home. A couple of wind-swept hours exploring mediaeval Goodrich Castle, a couple of miles down the A40, put a glow in our cheeks and gave me a healthy appetite for lunch. I would happily have returned to the Wilton Court to satisfy it.

FACTFILE

Directions The Wilton Court Hotel is minutes from the Wilton roundabout on the junction of the A40/A49 and B4260.

How much? A double room costs from £95 to £145 per night with breakfast. Special dinner bed and breakfast rates from £120 per room per night available until April 30 for a minimum two-night stay.

More information Telephone: 01989 562569, email: info@wiltoncourthotel.com Website: www.wiltoncourthotel.com

STAR DEALS

UK HOLIDAYS
EDINBURGH Ecosse Unique Cottages (01835 822 277) offers seven nights' self-catering in garden apartment of Peppercorn House, sleeping five in 17th Century fortified tower-house set in four acre gardens, for £365, saving £85.
JERSEY Channel Islands Direct (08444 937 486) offers two nights' B&B at weekends on arrivals until Feb 28 at three-star Revere Hotel in St Helier. Package at £135, saving £36, incl flights and transfers, with departures from range of reg airports.
LOCH LOMOND Superbreak (0871 222 3055) offers B&B from £49.75 per person on Fri-Sun stays until end-March at 18th Century baronial mansion of Cameron House.
YORK Superbreak (0871 222 3055) offers two nights' B&B at four-star York Marriott Hotel on south side of city for £100 per person per night, with dinner on first night, offer applies Fri-Sun until March 30.

LONG-HAUL
THAILAND Thomson Worldwide (0871 664 0273) offers seven nights' B&B at three-star hotel in Phuket ex-Heathrow with Thai Airways Feb 10 from £529, saving £261. Set in beautiful gardens, resort is 15 mins from lively Patong area.



BALI Thomson Worldwide (0871 664 0273) offers seven nights' room-only at three-star Bali Rani hotel from £549, saving £255, ex-Heathrow with Qatar Airways Feb 11.

BARBADOS Tropical Sky (0870 907 9600) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Almond Beach Club through Jan from £1,249, incl Virgin flights ex-Gatwick and transfers. May/June prices start at £1,149.

ST LUCIA BA Holidays (0844 493 0758) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star Almond Morgan Bay Beach resort from £1,239 on depts May 1 to June 30.

GOA/KERALA Goaway (0870 890 7800) offers six nights B&B in Kovalam in Kerala, and six in North Goa in quiet location of Calangute for £599, ex-Gatwick Jan 23 or 30. Price incl overnight Kerala to Goa train and return flights.

EGYPT Cadogan (0845 615 6793) offers seven nights' B&B at Hyatt Regency in Sharm el Sheikh from £849, saving up to £166 per couple, on stays between Jan 29 and Feb 28.



SHORT BREAKS
PRAGUE Inghams Short Breaks (0208 780 7710) offers three nights' B&B at three-star Hotel Anna from £209, incl return flights ex-Heathrow, if booked by Feb 14 to catch Bohemian Carnival (Feb 13 to 24).

SHORT-HAUL SUN
CAPE VERDE Holiday options (0844 477 0452) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star hotel ex-Birmingham Jan 30 for £599, saving £459. Same holiday ex-Gatwick Jan 26 costs £699, saving £330, or ex-Manchester Jan 27 for £699, saving £359.

MALTA Malta Direct (0845 604 0035) offers seven nights' B&B at three-star hotel in St Paul's Bay ex-Glasgow Feb 10 from £269, incl flights and transfers.

TUNISIA Wigmore (0207 836 4999) offers seven nights' B&B at charming Dar Dhafia on island of Jerba for £785, saving £45, on stays until Feb 12, incl sched return flights, pocket-sized guide, pen and silver-plated luggage tag.

NORTH CYPRUS Anatolian Sky (0845 365 1011) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at five-star beachfront Merit Crystal Cove Hotel from Feb 1 for £589, saving £100, incl flights ex-Stansted into Ercan, transfers.



THEMED HOLIDAYS
LIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA ITC Sports (01244 355 527) offers 21-night itineraries from £6,595 in June and July, following British and Irish Lions tour with hosts Fran Cotton, Derek Quinnett and Scott Hastings. Package incl four-star hotel accom, rugby transfers, official tickets, touring options, special meals and rugby forum, tour manager.

CYCLING IN LIMOUSIN Belle France (01580 214 010) offers six-night circuit of Limousin lakes for £904 in June, if booked by Jan 31, incl rail travel from St Pancras, transfers, cycle hire, half-board in chambre d'hotels and small hotels, luggage transfers and route notes.

CRUISES
NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS Hurtigruten (0208 846 2666) offers four-night voyage ex-Tromso to Kirkenes and back, ex-Stansted March 14, from £781, incl return flights, three nights' half-board on ship and B&B in Tromso.



MUSICAL INSPIRATION Studio 2 at Hansa Studios, Berlin, a former haunt of David Bowie.

Dancing in the streets of revitalised city

UNTIL the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, it was hard to imagine spending a funky weekend break in a German city to catch up on the latest European trends in fashion and music.

All that changed with the collapse of communism and re-emergence of Berlin. My partner and I booked a four-day break while Berlin hosted Popkomm, the music industry trade fair showcasing international and domestic live bands and DJs in venues across the capital.

Our base was The Ellington, a hotel dating back to the "roaring 1920s", noted for its rich musical heritage and something of an entertainment venue since 1949 when it hosted the Badewanne club, then Berlin's most important jazz spot.

During the disco and new-wave era of the 1970s, The Ellington became the celebrated, Dschungel, Berlin's counterpart to New York's Studio 54.

Our first stop on the U-Bahn (subway) was Zoologischer Garten. Berlin partisans U2 named

their album Zooropa and the track Zoo Station after this busy interchange. Above ground, we visited one of the many memorials to Jewish Holocaust victims.

From here we headed for the symbolic Brandenburg Gate. It stood at the centre of a huge no-man's land between east and west, and was the focal point of wild jubilation when the wall came down in 1989.

We then moved on to one of the great landmarks of the city and a symbol of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the impressive Fernsehturm (TV Tower). Take a speedy lift to the top of the tallest building in Berlin for a panoramic view of the city.

To understand how the city's music history continues to evolve, we embarked on a comprehensive circuit of the city courtesy of Fritz Music Tours. With former recording engineer Thilo at the helm, we hurtled around to retrace the steps of numerous rock stars.

From the hotel where Michael Jackson famously dangled his baby from a third-floor window, we moved swiftly on to the famous Hansa recording studios which used to overlook the wall. This was an additional extra to the tour, made possible by Thilo's insider connections.

The building's main hall was used as a ballroom by the Nazis and later became the famous Studio 2. David Bowie and Iggy Pop made six albums between them at Hansa.

For four fascinating days, we criss-crossed the city exploring numerous bric-a-brac shops, record stores and eccentric cafes on leafy streets, galleries and, of course, the not-so-subtle, circus-like Checkpoint Charlie.

Still evolving, Berlin is an absorbing glimpse of modern European history which you find nowhere else in our continent. As the buzz in bars and bustling street cafes demonstrates, this is one of Europe's coolest cities.

Tori Mayo