

Glorious valley passes the Test of time

This green and pleasant land boasts some fine hospitality, says **Beverley Glick**

On our way to Stockbridge, the sun broke through the clouds and illuminated verdant fields that undulated into the distance. In the Test Valley, you breathe clean air and think yes, this must be England's green and pleasant land.

It may not have inspired Blake's poem but this part of west Hampshire is every bit as lovely as its better-known neighbour, the New Forest.

The Test is the county's longest river, and its clear spring water and even flow have helped to make it one of the best trout fishing rivers in the world. It twists and turns through water-meadows, woods, villages and towns – Andover, Stockbridge and Romsey being the biggest.

One of the best ways to explore the valley is to walk or cycle its many footpaths, cycle ways and bridle paths – the Test Way is a 44-mile walk that includes a nine-mile stretch on the track bed of the old Sprat



Blooming gorgeous: Sir Harold Hillier gardens

and Winkle railway line. But my husband and I were on four wheels, so we stopped for lunch at Thyme & Tides, a bistro and deli on Stockbridge's broad and handsome high street.

With its vibrant atmosphere

and superb, home-made food, it was easy to see why it has won a Hampshire Hospitality Award, along with an array of eateries including the Bear and Ragged Staff in Michelmersh, The Mayfly in Testcombe and

The White Horse in Romsey, where we would be staying.

En route, we visited one of the area's horticultural gems, the 180-acre Sir Harold Hillier Gardens. At the Winter Garden, one of the largest in Europe

Fact file

More information: visit-hampshire.co.uk/places-to-visit/test-valley
thymeandtidesdeli.co.uk
hilliergardens.org.uk
nationaltrust.org.uk/mottisfont
houghtonlodge.co.uk
thewhitehorseromsey.co.uk
hawk-conservancy.org
chaplains-museum.hampshire.org.uk

with more than 1,100 different plants, we enjoyed the wonderful fragrances of winter-flowering shrubs and carpets of delicate snowdrops. There are many different themed areas here, all of which have their season. Other great gardens are at Mottisfont, a National Trust historic house near Romsey, and Houghton Lodge near Stockbridge.

The river dominates the market town of Romsey, with its Norman Abbey. Nearby, The White Horse, has been the town's principal inn since medieval times and now has AA four-star status (and a second rosette for its superb brasserie).

We stayed in the Penthouse Suite, tucked away on a floor of its own. It was worth climbing several flights of stairs to relax in its contemporary luxury which included a superking-sized Italian leather bed, a walk-in dressing room and a huge marble bathroom with a double-ended bath and large shower with body jets.

Other gentle pursuits include a visit to the award-winning Hawk Conservancy Trust near Andover. Set in 22 acres, it offers spectacular flying demonstrations. And at the Museum of Army Chaplaincy at Amport House we saw fascinating archive material and historical relics.

Surround yourself in wild beauty

Style, spas, scenery, 007 action and great food are on the New Forest's menu

I've had few more tranquil experiences than waking in the Deluxe Suite at the Montagu Arms in Beaulieu as the sun streamed through windows on both sides of my bed. This is country-house-style comfort at its best, right in the heart of the New Forest National Park.

The hotel has four AA stars and a Michelin-starred restaurant, The Terrace (I recommend the six-course tasting menu). For those who prefer more rustic fare, Monty's Inn is next door.

Guests have use of the leisure facilities at sister hotel Careys Manor, near Brockenhurst. It houses the award-winning SenSpa, which has 16 treatment rooms, a large hydrotherapy pool, herbal sauna and steam room. Here you can enjoy Thai-inspired treatments and dine at the Zen Garden Thai Restaurant.

Also near Brockenhurst, deep in the forest among conifers and scented pines, is the Rhinefield House Hotel, a grand country house in Tudor and gothic style. The Rhinefield Spa offers a range of

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More information: careysmanor.com
handpickedhotels.co.uk/hotels/rhinefield-house
montaguarmshotel.co.uk
newforestactivities.co.uk
beaulieu.co.uk
exbury.co.uk
newforestwildlifepark.co.uk
 For great ideas on short breaks and days out for couples: visitsoutheastengland.com/timeforus



Old and new: Beaulieu's Palace House; inset, the pool at Careys Manor & Senspa



treatments including speciality lava shell and bamboo massages.

Beaulieu village is the ideal starting point for a weekend break. It sits on the banks of the Beaulieu river and Mill Pond, across which you can see Palace House, home of Lord and Lady Montagu. The little village is charming, especially when a New Forest pony holds up the traffic. Just along the High Street is the award-winning New Forest Activities Centre where you can book anything from archery or cycling to kayaking.

A short drive away is the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu Abbey, Palace House and Gardens. New for 2012 is the *Bond in Motion* exhibition, the world's largest official collection of 007 vehicles.

Amazing conservation work on the otter is undertaken at the New Forest Wildlife Park, where you can also observe other species such as owls, deer, wild boar, lynx and even wolves.

Also within easy reach is Exbury Gardens, setting for the Rothschild Collection of rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias, which explode into colour in spring. But there is magic to be found in other seasons and you can view it all from the Exbury Gardens Steam Railway.

There is so much to see and do, that we are already planning a return trip to the New Forest in summer to witness its beauty in the sunshine.