

Room service

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Paddy Burt stays at the The Queen's Head Hotel, near Loughborough, Leicestershire where elaborate food and a warm welcome leave her hungry for more.

I am always a bit suspicious of recommendations from PR companies. "I was just wandering (sic) if you had received the information about The Queen's Head, Belton?" asks one of them, going on to say they "could offer me a complimentary (sic) visit." Well, I have news for them: I don't do complimentary visits (I assume that's what they mean) because I always book and pay the bill as Mr and Mrs Ordinary-Guest. This way we don't get fawned over.

From what I had read, this was a run-down old boozier, which had been gutted and refurbished from top to bottom, in an unremarkable village just outside Loughborough. Now The Queen's Head is painted a dazzling white, with conifers in pots outside its entrance. The bar, where we go to make ourselves known, is uncompromisingly cool and modern, yet - surprisingly - has a cosy, country pub feel to it.

Most of the ceiling is panelled with rather nice blonde wood and the bar front is upholstered with brown leather. The bar stools look like leather drums on legs, the lighting is just right and there are a number of leather armchairs and sofas.

Our room, carpeted in oatmeal, is a total contrast. The white-painted carved headboard is a surprise, while the metal sofa looks like something that people might put in their gardens - as a plant stand. Although it has cushions, it's not the sort of sofa most people would want to sit on and watch the television. My husband stops moaning when he finds a Lloyd Loom armchair. I plump up the pillows and sit on the bed.

Going down to the bar, we find numerous punters and plenty of black-clad staff, who are warm and outgoing. From a list that seems a little pricey, we order a bottle of Francesca Bay New Zealand Sauvignon, which takes ages to appear. I soon get chatting to someone - it's that sort of place - and after giving our order things hot up and we're soon in the restaurant with our bottle of wine.

"Chef's compliments," says the waitress, bringing us tiny cups of intensely-flavoured mushroom soup - we've already been brought warm rolls and an olive oil dip. My first course is an unusual combination of cream of artichoke soup, roasted cod and a quail's egg. Unusual but most enjoyable. My husband is brought a work of art: tian of crab, smoked salmon, creamed avocado and red pepper essence, in a neat, cylindrical stack. "It tastes as good as it looks," he declares.

What really surprises us, though, is to find on the menu one starter and one main course which include foie gras, as there seems to be a growing revulsion to it. I have asked for the pan-fried brill with anna potatoes, roasted cep mushrooms and cauliflower pannacotta minus the foie gras.

My husband has chosen a most complicated-sounding dish consisting of roast fillet of beef, slow-cooked ox cheek, black truffle mash, roasted beets and red wine jus. "The fillet steak is perfect, pink, tender and tasty although, on reflection, perhaps I should have asked for it without the ox cheek," he says.

As for afters, this pudding person is delighted to find pan-fried prune soufflé with spiced bread ice cream on the menu. I have never heard of "pan-fried soufflé" but it turns out to be right up my street. My husband orders the Valrhona chocolate brownie, with ice cream and warm blueberries. He has no complaints, either.

Apart from its elaborate food, this place is very much a pub, with a door at the side leading to the bedrooms and no residents' sitting-room. Breakfast starts at 9.30 on Sunday, very nice for anyone who wants a lie-in and a leisurely breakfast but somewhat irritating for those who want to make an early start.

We leave with memories of a place with plenty of charm and where we have been made most welcome.

- The Queen's Head Hotel, 2 Long Street, Belton, nr Loughborough, Leicestershire LE12 9TP (01530 222359, www.thequeenshead.org) has six rooms. Paddy Burt paid £100 for a double room; £20.25 for drinks and wine; and £60.75 for dinner. Total: £181.00

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