

STATELY PROGRESS

English Country House Hotels, in Proper Style

Everybody's freaked out about the weak dollar and the expense of European travel, but my friend Janet and I didn't let that faze us. We went to England and stayed at several of the best country house hotels, on a driving trip for which it seemed only proper to use a car that was iconically British in its balance of power and understatement, of history and modernity. We therefore chose a Bentley. It was a royal blue Arnage, with an interior precision-stitched in delicious cream and blue leather. The Arnage is Bentley's solid, boxy four-door—the Big Ben of the British road. There was nothing flashy about this vehicle, but people paid attention and we had fun imagining who they thought we were. Of course, this being England, hardly anyone mentioned

it—aside from one kid who called out, "Nice car!"

Our first stay was at a country house that is not actually a hotel. English Heritage, which conserves historic properties, also rents cottages on their grounds to travelers. We took Cambridge Lodge, located just outside a charming medieval village that is now a London bedroom community. Our small but lavishly detailed two-story house of brick and limestone was built in 1842; it was the gatehouse for Audley End, an abbey reconstructed into a magnificent estate in the early 17th century, that was once the retreat of King Charles II.

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Now, the problem with transatlantic flights is that they are too short for decent sleep. So it made a very soft landing to arrive at our own house—with long views over gorgeous parkland, and nobody we had to smile at. As at all of English Heritage's rental



Lavish living. Audley End House, shown here, is among the grandest of England's historic homes. It's not a hotel, but you can stay in its charming gate lodge.

properties, the interior was unfussily modern and surprisingly well-appointed. By morning we were refreshed and ready to take the wheel.

It was off to Lake District, north via motorway. The countryside was mostly gentle and lush. But the Lake District was austere: steep, low, rocky mountains where sheep grazed; tiny winding roads edged with mossy stone walls; whole villages of stone buildings with slate roofs. We stayed at Sharrow Bay. This establishment claims to be the original country house hotel. It has an impossibly beautiful position at the head of a lake formed by the fault between

two long ridges. Converted in 1948, it seemed suspended in history: floral patterns and ruffles, endless breakable bits of Victorian glass and china, an unobtrusive palette of pink and green.

Dinner, too, was similarly old-school, but rather

French—and terrific fun. The drill at a country house hotel is that you turn up in the lounge at "7:30 for 8:00." You have a drink while perusing the menu, and order from there. We sat considering our options among other discreetly murmuring couples in one of Sharrow Bay's multiple parlors. An *amuse-gueule* arrived, a mouthful of pink lamb medallion with pea-and-parsley risotto. Dinner started with a salad of smoked duck, poached pear and grilled goat cheese. Our fish course was a simply sautéed plaice filet with shallot mashed potatoes, followed by sorbet, followed by veal and sweetbreads with cabbage and mushrooms. And then dessert. And then cheese. Dinner is a big deal at these places. Here the dining room was overseen by a martini-dry John Gielgud look-alike straight from Central Casting, whom Janet immediately dubbed Manners the Butler. Sharrow Bay felt like a theme park—the theme being mid-20th century upper-crust English life—and we enjoyed that.

On our way north that day, we had stopped to tour the Bentley factory. This is not something just anyone can do. You must either own a Bentley or be

ordering one. We looked over displays on the company's history, and admired several vintage cars. But it was the factory floor that entranced us. This was a clinically spotless indoor universe so vast we could hardly see from end to end. An overhead assembly line proceeded with regally slow pacing; in the intervals, teams of dedicated workers rose to do the kind of coach building found almost nowhere else on earth. We learned that 17 hides had gone into the upholstery of our Arnage; its gleaming veneers had taken 79 hours to craft. Prospective owners come to make design choices—contrasting piping? Stainless steel fascias instead of wood? Doing that would be almost as fun as working with an architect to plan your dream house; cost almost as much, too. Honestly, we had to tear ourselves away to reach Sharrow Bay before dark.

Next morning was misty. We motored around the Lake District ogling the dramatic landscape, and stopped for walks in storybook towns. Our destination was Farlam Hall, only 30-some miles northeast, but in lower and more open terrain that, unlike the Lake District, is little visited. This 12-room establishment felt intimate. A member of the family that runs it greeted us warmly and helped us plan an afternoon drive over virtually empty back roads. Our goal was Hadrian's Wall, a barrier across England's narrowest point built in the second century by occupying Romans.

It was drizzling by the time we set out. Looking south from a high point on the wall's route we had a sweeping, soggy, quietly stunning vista. Underfoot



To the manor born. (Clockwise from above left) In Le Manoir's relaxed conservatory dining room, *joie de vivre* is the rule and people feel able to enjoy themselves, even laugh out loud; Le Manoir's gardens provide produce and cut flowers nearly year-round; a state-of-the-art kitchen at The Grove reveals the thoroughly modern makeover which the historic house received.

its present name suggests, the sensibility now is French. Chef Raymond Blanc opened a restaurant with rooms here in 1984. Over time, sympathetic renovation of the rambling house and outbuildings—an adaptive reuse much lauded by English Heritage—yielded 14 guest suites and 18 guest rooms. Each room has its own theme and look—even coordinated toiletries. Ours, Sandalwood, had a private brick-paved courtyard hung with grapevines and espaliered apple trees. Through an arch were sculpture-filled gardens that provide the hotel with flowers and produce nearly year-round. Details were exquisite here: a plate of pristine figs waiting in our room, a basket of flakey, melty pastries each morning, the 11-course dinner in the two-Michelin-star



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were the excavated remains of an ancient military outpost; this spot had been the northernmost edge of the Roman Empire. It still felt mighty remote—which was part of Farlam Hall's quiet appeal, too. The menu there was unabashedly English. I had cream of celery and Stilton soup, and fried calf's liver and bacon with apple mashed potatoes.

Sharrow Bay and Farlam Hall are members of Relais & Châteaux. So is Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, back in the south of England near Oxford. While this estate appears in English records as early as 1225, as

restaurant. Many chic but under-the-radar weddings are held at Le Manoir. "It's just right for a first, a second or even a third," Janet opined.

Our final country house hotel, well back within London's gravity field, was The Grove. This is the country house hotel on steroids, a country house hotel for the 21st century. The estate itself spreads over 300 acres of woodlands and architectural gardens, including a golf course and vast underground spa. It is claimed that the English tradition of the weekend house party was invented here when it

was the home of the Earls of Clarendon—with guest lists that included Queen Victoria and Edward VII. The huge, severely classical main house has been given a darkly sexy, deconstructed, *Alice-in-Wonderland* interior design. Things are wackily out of scale. Hallways are heavily draped with black velvet, over blood-red walls. In the lounge at one of the three restaurants, a wall is paved with smashed dinner plates. A new wing big enough to include conference facilities and bring the total count of guest rooms to 227 was designed to minimize its bulk; from many views, it is hardly visible. The Grove is pervaded by an atmosphere of loose—not to say decadent—contemporary luxury. That is expressed in the food, too: John Dory comes with clams, piquillo peppers and pine nuts; pigeon *pot au feu* with *foie gras* comes with baby vegetables and thyme dumplings. With its size and seductive choices, The Grove would be a lovely place to spend a week. Alas, we had booked for only one night. In the morning, a fellow arrived to retrieve beautiful royal blue Big Ben. We climbed into The Grove's house car to be driven into central London. That was a perfectly serviceable Mercedes sedan—but not a Bentley. Our grand tour had ended. ○