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**English lords knew a few things about luxury.
You could get used to this.**

Splendid countryside and ancient forests surround Combe House, Devon's quintessential English manor house hotel. Even Prince Charles agreed.

What would life be without the odd splurge?

Sure there's a recession on, but unless you're sold on reincarnation, we only pass this way one time around. As an excuse, that's pretty decent.

Both Anglophiles, my wife and I were in England and our 5th anniversary was approaching. We were prime candidates for a mini-stay at a famed, cosseted English country hotel.

The mechanical Englishwoman's voice on the TomTom in our rental car guided us through narrow high-hedged lanes hemmed in by towering beech forests and verdant hayfields, until we reached a spot she referred to as "Unnamed Road." I reflected with vague apprehension upon the fact that I hadn't spent all that much time doing web research before booking our stay. One random visit to a Devon Tourist Authority site had led me to the homepage for Combe House, and after perusing some spectacular photos, a brief phone call from New York clinched our reservation. The clues were

all in place though: the hotel had repeatedly won a series of coveted stars and awards from British magazines for Most Romantic Country Hotel, Best Restaurant in Southwest England and the like, and the blurbs seemed to convey a stylish sensibility.

I need not have worried one iota.

The vista that revealed itself as we drove up the endless winding driveway approaching the stately home was enough to cause immediate pumping of arms in the air and high-fiving. Situated on its own in a majestic valley on a 3,500 acre estate, the cream sandstone walls, ivy covered turrets and slate roofs of an imposing and beautifully kept-up 700-year old castle rather over-delivered on our fantasies. Crossing the timbered threshold of the entrance hall through a gigantic wooden door, we were met by our host, Ken Hunt, a jovial, rumped and highly unstuffy man. He ushered us into cavernous wood-paneled hunting hall hung with horse paintings, under a high Georgian vaulted ceiling. Fragrant logs crackled away in the massive and ornate stone fireplace, even in the middle of July. At eleven in the morning our rooms weren't quite ready yet so we arranged for tea and sandwiches to be brought to us in one of the side drawing rooms. After a superb English tea served in fine china on silver plates, we took a stroll outside through spacious flower gardens, marveling at the displays and at beds of organic vegetables we had been informed would end up on our plates by dinner.

Ken and Ruth Hunt offer a high level of service that is both comforting and, what's more, rather hip. Our "superior room" turned out to be a fully self-contained apartment in white and blue, the most stunning feature of which was a hand painted wall mural of phoenix (or *foo*) birds, the symbol of Combe House. Our bright hexagonal bathroom housed a clawfoot bathtub deep enough and long enough to drown in, surrounded by heated chrome

pipes for towels, and came with views out over the garden. You're warm as toasted crumpets here, no draughty passages, and your TV screen is plasma. Then there's the pull-chain toilet, a proudly labeled reissue of the original Thomas Crapper, that model that became the gold standard of the British Empire a century ago. Lights switch on automatically as you walk through your hallway, fresh flowers scent in every room, fluffy deep feather pillows and bed await, virtually crying out for you to call room service and dine in bed. Our blue bedroom had a white cove above the bed, surrounded by wonderful murals painted by Lady Markham, owner of the house until the 1960's. The bedroom extended into a lead-windowed drawing room adjoining it that overlooked the front drive and acres of pastoral country estate.

Combe House has only 15 guest suites, each with an individual theme and decor, ranging from lead-windowed country house to ultra modern town loft. One of the most popular is The Linen Room, a reconverted Victorian laundry facilities. In this suite, original drying wooden drying racks hang on the ceiling and a giant copper washtub have been incorporated into an ultrastylish white-on-white linen scheme.

At dinner that night, our cuisine was prepared under the eye of Master Chef Hadley Barrett, and consisted of an appetizer of wild quail with fennel, ginger and sherry reduction, followed by an entrée of line-caught sea bream cured in tea smoke over pureed celeriac and a wild strawberry sauce. Food is sourced so locally that it's counted in "food metres" rather than food miles, with great effort made to support nearby organic farms, apiaries, natural meat and poultry producers and sustainable fish provisioners. Breakfast involves any number of choices but could be locally-smoked kippers (herring eaten hot), heritage pork sausages, smoked bacon, fresh

eggs, sautéed mushrooms, grilled tomatoes, toast with homemade marmalade.

Wild Arabian horses stabled nearby are occasionally allowed to run on the fields around the hotel, and there's a seasonal array of special stays – hay cutting in summer, autumn leaves, a Christmas sojourn with caroling, wassailing and dinners around a long table by the fireside – a movie dream brought to life. And then there's spring with the wildflowers. You could run out of seasons, in fact.

The staff is assembled from a combination of English locals, Italians and Eastern Europeans, all comprehensively schooled in the art of pampering. Far from having to track down someone to explain how the thermostat works, you're asked frequently whether there's anything at all that you need, and what will be brought to you is invariably of the highest standard.

North Americans don't need to take on traveling by car if the notion of driving on the wrong side of the road is intimidating. From London's Waterloo Station to the nearby town of Honiton is only a 2 ¼ hours train trip, and then a short, inexpensive drop-off by cab. You're better off spending your time enjoying the hotel and surroundings than traveling to other towns to visit typical tourist spots like scenic houses, gardens and castles. When you're at Combe House, believe me, you are already *there*. You can hike through farms that border the estate's massive private grounds and follow acres of country pathways that traverse gigantic old growth beech forests. Eventually you'll circle through the small country thatched-roof villages, Norman church and tiny bridges of Gittisham, the quaint Saxon village that was proclaimed by Prince Charles to be “the most ideal in Britain.” On your foot-powered tour, stop in to a country pub like the Fox and Hounds, where you can secure a feast of English farmhouse cheeses,

chutneys and home baked breads or steak and kidney pies for 7 pounds (\$12), downed with a pint of local scrumpy, a strong natural apple cider, or a local beer, like Otter Ale. If you're compelled to venture further afield, you're only twenty-two miles away from the Southeast Coast and the scenic village of Lyme Regis, possessed of a long jetty and seafront that has featured in countless historical movies and dramas.

Despite the fact that our country house stay was costing us approximately three times as much as a bed and breakfast, the math results in terms of rejuvenation ended in an equation at least fifty times greater. We were as comfortable as could be. The logs in the fire were chosen for their crackle and fragrance. The staff seemed to be genuinely interested in us and in making certain that we were luxuriating. The bartender laughed at our jokes. The other guests were smiling. Not a complaint was heard.

I asked Ken Hunt what made his day and he replied, most sincerely, "Exceeding guests' expectations is always a great sense of achievement."

In terms of cost, Hunt says that "the shoulders of the year," meaning late fall and early spring, are probably the best times to visit if you're in search of a bargain. Additionally, there is generally some kind of special offer available due to last-minute cancellations, easily checkable on their website.

A two-night stay at Combe House is all you need for a complete recharge of batteries, and the memories will last much longer, hopefully, than the current financial slump. In fact, like all great places to visit, your first thought upon seeing the front door, if you're like me, is, "Please sir, when can I come again?"

Combe House Hotel. Information and rates at **ThisHotel.com**

High season, rooms from £199-399 (US \$325-620 dbl occ). Check website for specials and seasonal deals.

Combe House Hotel is located near the village of **Honiton**, near Axminster, Essex. **Telephone: (from the US) is: 011- 44 -01404-540400**. Closest train stop: Axminster on Southeast Trains from Victoria Station, frequent, daily schedules: SouthWestTrains.co.uk/