

CLIVEDEN – A LUXURY COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL

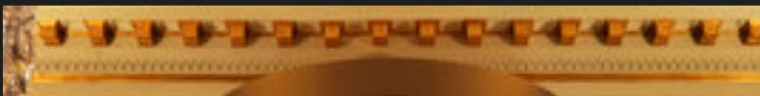
By Caroline Phillips



After years of being so-so, Cliveden – the statelyest of stately home hotels – now deserves a trillion regal curtsies. Prepare ye for a (rare) eulogy – because the hotel's new leaseholders, the Livingstone brothers, have been making changes with oodles of fairy dust, cash and sophisticated taste, and they have pulled not so much a rabbit out of a hat as a voluptuous grande dame dressed in fashionable finery.



The newly refurbished East Wing – the first stage of restoration of the principal bedrooms – has just opened (in April). It's gaspingly gorgeous in a silk and hand-painted-wallpaper type of way. Plus, chef André Garrett (formerly head chef at Galvin at Windows) recently started cooking up a classical French storm for his sublime, eponymous restaurant here. The dining area has been moved from the (dingy) basement to the ground floor, now giving breathtaking views over the Parterre. Even the staff have morphed into perfect prototypes – friendly, super-attentive and solicitous without being unctuous or heel-clicking.

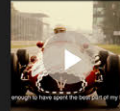


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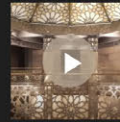
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Let's wind back. Some things stay the same. Like entering Cliveden – set in 376 National Trust-owned acres and with 21,000 tulips in its Walled Garden – and driving excitedly past the 19th century shell fountain, called the Fountain of Love, and catching my breath at the sight of Cliveden, the Victorian Italianate mansion where Palladian meets Cinquecento (this in Taplow, Buckinghamshire?), before clocking its clock tower – actually a water tower – in all its Victorian showiness, flamboyance and oomph. Then entering the Great Hall, with its oak paneling, ginormous 16th century carved fireplace, portrait of Nancy Astor by Sargent, 18th century Belgian tapestries and suits of armour.



For more than three centuries, Cliveden has been home to English nobility, and past guests

include Charlie Chaplin, Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw, and every king and queen since George I. It's where John Profumo, then secretary of state for war, famously met Christine Keeler, a party girl who was involved with a Soviet naval attaché – leading explosively to the Profumo Affair.



In the Roaring Twenties, you'd have needed a personal invitation from Lady Astor to stay here; now you just need a few hundred quid. Or £1,572 per night for Lady Astor's former bedroom – a suite with enough space to swing 60 wedding guests (or hundreds of cats). Ah yes, the suites – 'Garibaldi' and 'Mountbatten' and the like, named after those who slept there before me. The décor is by Mario Nicolaou, each in a different style with layerings of beautiful fabrics, delicate and intricate trimmings, eclectic furnishings, antiques and artworks.



The Chinese suite with Nancy Astor's fireplace, its luxurious wallpaper, scintillating sun, yolk and sand colours suffused with light, and its four-poster dressed so well she could go to a ball, is exquisite. Then there's the Mountbatten suite – an erstwhile billiards room – with acres of deep oak panelling, gentlemen's club vibe and rich greens. Plus Spring Cottage – a summer house built to entertain Queen Victoria and with bespoke stone steps to a landing stage on the Thames – peaceful with its sea blues, mustards and sage fabrics midst the bluebell woods and fields of daffs.



And what of the master chef, André Garrett? He's clearly en route to a Michelin star or ten. His technique is faultless. His combination of flavours, textures and temperatures is magical – it's complex, multi-layered, imaginative cooking with an incredible lightness of touch. He whirled up a tantalising tartare of hand-dived Orkney scallops with black radish, smoked eel beignets, cod roe and English caviar; a beautiful ballotine of foie gras and Cotswold white chicken, Cumbrian ham and salt-baked celeriac, golden raisins, hazelnuts; and sweetest of Scottish langoustine thermidor with grilled baby gem; all followed by slow-cooked Cox apple, rosemary caramel, raisin puree, beure noisette crumb, walnut ice-cream – a menu so delicious I want to eat it. (The menu, that is.)



Is anything wrong with the place? The wonderful Twenties outdoor swimming pool is still there – built to stop Nancy Astor swimming in the Thames – but it hasn't benefited aesthetically from the recent addition of two wooden hot tubs beside it. The Spa needs a major face-lift, if not radical surgery – but that is planned. Word is they're going to refurbish the Club Room restaurant in the former stable block, but I hope they don't – it's kitsch and delightfully eccentric. Finally, I find myself praying for plagues of locusts and hail, but that's only because I'm enough of a fantasist to want to keep National Trust day trippers out of "my" Cliveden garden.



This is me looking to find fault. Really, Cliveden is Sophisticate Central. There's everything – and more – for the discerning traveller. The hotel's motto is apposite: nothing ordinary ever happened here, nor could it.

www.clivedenhouse.co.uk





Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines, to various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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